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Mark Keaton's Extension News: Fireplaces can be dangerous

As cold weather approaches, there's nothing like a roaring fire in your fireplace. But danger can lurk in your fireplace or chimney. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 20,600 fires and 40 deaths per year are associated with fireplaces and chimneys.

Every year, Arkansas homes are destroyed by fires that start in fireplaces and chimneys and wood-burning stoves and furnaces. Arkansas ranks among the leading states in fire deaths.

Burning wood in homes is popular for aesthetic and economic reasons. It is estimated that nearly 250,000 homes, about one in four Arkansas homes, burns wood.

Most of the time, burning firewood is a safe experience.

When the first big cold front comes through, people stoke up a fire in their fireplace, and invariably there will be several chimney fires, according to the state fire marshal's office. A roaring fire can ignite tar and creosote that have built up in the chimney.

Safety begins with an annual inspection and, if necessary, a thorough cleaning of the chimney. You should hire a reputable chimney sweep to inspect and clean, according to the state fire marshal's office. Some insurance companies will provide homeowners a financial incentive to get an inspection.

To inspect it yourself, take the cap off the top of the chimney and either shine a flashlight down the chimney or drop a light bulb on the end of an electric cord down the chimney to inspect the tile for cracks and for tar and creosote buildup. If there is a pipe from a fireplace insert in the chimney, check it for rust and creosote buildup.

If there is a problem with buildup, clean the tile or pipe with a brush designed for that purpose, then reinspect to make sure you didn't cause additional damage.

Also check the firebox for cracks and buildup.

People need to make sure their smoke detectors are in working order and that flammable objects are moved at least three feet from a fireplace or wood-burning stove. Smoke detectors are a cheap prevention for a devastating fire.

Here are some additional tips.

☐ If your fireplace is not equipped with a gas starter, use kindling wood. Newspaper shouldn't be used because the flaming paper can rise and ignite a chimney if it has creosote buildup. Don't use wood treated with a preservative for kindling or firewood. Inhaling the smoke from this wood can be dangerous.

☐ It's also important to make sure you start the fire and finish the fire with hot, dry wood to help eliminate residue buildup in the chimney. Don't put a large green log on the fire and let it smolder through the night. It doesn't burn as hot as dry wood, and it causes creosote buildup.

☐ It's important to burn only seasoned firewood. The wood should be cut and stacked for use the following year. It will burn hotter and cause less residue buildup in your chimney.

☐ Artificial logs made from compressed sawdust or wood chips mixed with wax or paraffin burn evenly and have the advantage of not being as messy as firewood. However, they are expensive. They make excellent fire starters, or you can use them instead of firewood.

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