



Make sure your chimney is safe in time for holiday use

CHIMNEY CHECK

By Harrison Gregory/Homes writer

Whether it's a space for gathering the family around a warm hearth or the entryway for a certain chubby, jolly, bearded houseguest, the fireplace is likely to be a central feature of your home this holiday season. While decorating the mantel, bear in mind that fireplace maintenance is essential to the safety of a home. But, above the fireplace, hidden inside the chimney itself, may be less visible issues. Despite the busy season, Marcel Lalik, owner of Hanover Chimney Sweeps, was able to provide us with some insight into several chimney safety concerns.

One easy thing to do that may be overlooked is to walk outside and examine the chimney cap. According to Lalik, the cap should be clear and free of debris, or anything else that might cause clogging. "Make sure the chimney is drawing [smoke] the way it's supposed to," he said. Also keep an eye out for any nests or animals that may have taken up residence near the cap.

Inside the house, it's important to check the flue and the damper for any damage. The damper should open and close correctly, and it should seal efficiently so as to not let excess air in or out. Lalik advised checking the flue for separation between the tiles, so that

flames cannot seep into the home, and be on the lookout for cracked bricks or missing mortar inside the firebox. The flue liner should also be intact and in good condition.

Lalik emphasized that it's important to look directly up into the chimney when checking for safety. If you see the buildup of a slick, shiny black substance, it's likely creosote. "It looks like somebody spray painted the inside of the chimney," he said. Flammable, and a major cause of chimney fires, creosote is produced by the incomplete combustion of wood. The hotter the fire, the less creosote, so it's a good idea to occasionally increase the air flow and burn dry hardwood for more complete combustion.

Another issue that Lalik runs into during his work is moisture damage. "If you see a lot of white, chalky-looking stuff at the top of the chimney, that's moisture," he said. It's something that can cause problems over time, and Lalik recommends having a professional come out and take a look.

For homes that have different kinds of heating sources, such as wood-burning stoves, gas-burning fireplaces or gas and oil furnaces, there are other issues to consider. In the case of a wood-burning stove, the stainless steel positive

connect pipe should extend from the top of the stove all the way to the top of the chimney. Check the top plate and cap for damages to ensure that the smoke is being properly drawn out. With a gas fireplace, the igniter should be tested and any obstructions should be cleared from clogged burner holes. For homes with oil and gas furnaces, the boiler appliances are usually checked, but folks often forget that the chimney should be examined as well. "That's something a lot of people don't think about," Lalik said.

Although you may be able to handle some of the aforementioned issues yourself, Lalik advised having a professional take a thorough look at your chimney. "The biggest thing is to have the chimney cleaned and inspected so you don't have to worry about a chimney fire," he said. The National Fire Protection Association recommends having your chimney checked yearly. "The other thing any chimney sweep will tell you is to clean your chimney as soon as you're done that season," Lalik said. This preemptive move will not only keep the chimney in decent shape, but it will also cut down on additional maintenance that may have to be done when late fall rolls back around.

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Fire up with safety

The temperatures are dropping and fireplaces and wood stoves are heating up. Here are a few tips from Richmond Fire and Emergency Services to help ensure your home's safety.

- Have chimneys and wood stoves inspected and cleaned by certified technicians each fall.
- Make sure wood stoves carry the

label of an independent testing laboratory.

- Allow ashes to cool thoroughly before discarding. Place them in a metal container and keep it at least 10 feet from buildings.
- Create a no-play zone of 3 feet around stoves and fireplaces.
- Use a fireplace screen to contain hot embers.
- Keep combustibles at least 3 feet from fireplaces and wood stoves.

- Install a carbon monoxide alarm on every level of your home and outside each sleeping area. "Carbon monoxide alarms should not replace smoke alarms," advised Lt. Robbie Hagaman, "but should be used in conjunction with them."

