

January 2008 - Chimney Fires

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Do you know what to do in the event of a chimney fire? They are very common, particularly in the early winter months. The actions you take can make a great difference.

Chimney fires happen when the creosote that accumulates on the inside of your chimney pipe ignites in the heat and sparks from a fire in your fireplace or wood stove. Generally, the first indication one is happening is a roaring, jet engine like noise as the fire draws lots of air up the chimney. Metal chimney pipes may start to glow orange, and sparks and flames can shoot out the top of your chimney, making this a serious threat to overhanging tree limbs and wood shakes.

The quickest way to put out a chimney fire is to carefully throw a small amount of water onto the fire in the fireplace or stove and then, if it has doors, close them quickly. A single glass or coffee cup of water will usually do the trick. The steam emitted will snuff out the chimney fire almost immediately. Be very careful when doing this, as the steam can cause burns and the fireplace or stove may be hotter than usual thanks to the chimney fire itself. Only try this if you can do it safely.

Always call 911 if you have a chimney fire, even if you put it out or it goes out by itself. It is very easy for chimney fires to extend outside the chimney. They push through or create cracks in metal and mortar, and can start fires inside attics and roofs. Your fire department will examine the area around the chimney, checking for extension into other spaces. If anything else is found we'll put it out.

Often we'll use a thermal imaging camera (or TIC) to assist with this investigation. The TIC is a digital, infrared camera that lets us see temperature changes within materials. If the walls around your chimney are obviously hot after the chimney fire is out, we need to look for extension of the fire and put it out before it spreads. Your donations through the annual barbecue helped us acquire the thermal imaging cameras we use.

If you have a chimney fire, you must not use that fireplace again until it has been inspected by a professional chimney cleaner or contractor. As mentioned above, chimney fires can create cracks in metal and mortar, causing your flue to be unsafe until it is repaired. A cracked flue or chimney could cause another fire, or emit smoke and hazardous gases into your home.

Avoiding chimney fires is relatively simple: have your chimney cleaned and inspected annually. This simple step removes the soot from your chimney and thus reduces the risk of chimney fires. It's usually a simple procedure. The chimney cleaner will also clean your spark arrestor, which helps airflow through your fireplace. An annual chimney cleaning is an easy way to prevent a very serious problem.