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Wood vs. gas

*Fireplaces have come a long way*

Fireplaces are nearly as old as mankind. A pile of sticks burning in a cave was really a fireplace of some sort.

We've come a long way since then. New burning techniques, different types of fuels, and government regulations have changed the form and function of the hole in the wall called a fireplace.

Unless you live in a town where wood-burning fireplaces are prohibited by law, the typical fireplace built in a spec home today isn't a great deal different than those that were built 50 years ago. It has an open front, it burns wood logs, and it probably smokes if you don't open a window a crack.

Other options are available, of course. There are high-efficiency wood-burning and pellet-burning stoves and fireplaces. There are fireplace inserts that can be used to update an old wood-burning fireplace to be an efficient heating device. In recent years the trend has been to use gas. It burns clean, is relatively inexpensive, and if you have ceramic logs, the flames simulate the look of real wood burning.

If you want to use the fireplace as an auxiliary heating device, wood or pellets are still the most popular options. The newest fireplaces using these fuels have controls to automate the burning and fans to distribute heat. Many don't even require a chimney; just a duct to the outside to eliminate fumes

and smoke. In fact, the burning efficiency of many of these fireplaces is so good that there is very little smoke.

If ambiance is the most important element in your fireplace design, you'll probably select gas. Turning it on is as simple as flipping an electric switch. Some even have remote controls, just like your TV set. Ceramic logs and lighting controls will create a beautiful fire.

The newest fireplaces and inserts don't even require a chimney. Using naturally clean-burning gas, and sensors that measure oxygen depletion, these products meet all the safety requirements of the various codes. If the oxygen gets too low, the fireplace shuts itself off.

Most of these fireplaces have the option of being connected to a chimney or outside vent. If you use them quite often, I'd go for the vent. Personally, I don't like to use an unvented burning device where someone is living, particularly older people or those with breathing or lung disorders. The instructions provided with some of the units suggest that you open a window slightly while using an unvented fireplace. To me, that is a warning. So if you decide to use an unvented fireplace, use it with caution.

For more valuable house maintenance advice, log on to [www.housenet.com](http://www.housenet.com), the premier home, garden, and lifestyle Web site on the Internet. —By Bob Gould, HouseNet

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