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**Inspect fireplace before use this year**

The chill of winter is in the air and the thought of warming up by a nice toasty fire seems enticing.

But before using your fireplace or wood burning stove, you need to ensure it is operating properly in order to maintain the safety of family members.

And even if you've been enjoying a crackling fire already, it's never too late to do a safety check.

"Any wood-burning device should be checked periodically and cleaned according to usage," said Thomas E. Finney, vice president of technical services for HouseMaster, a home inspection company.

"Proper annual maintenance will allow for years of

enjoyable, yet safe, usage of fireplaces and wood burning stoves."

**Safety First**

It's important that homeowners conduct their own yearly inspection to ensure that their units perform properly.

Before using the fireplace for the first time, Finney suggested checking the visible areas of the chimney for any blockages or creosote (a highly flammable, gummy deposit) build-up on the interior of chimney walls and the surface of the flue.

Any deposits over a quarter of an inch thick can

**HEALTH**

be a potential fire hazard and should be cleaned professionally.

"The burning of green wood can create a cooler fire, which can increase the chance of the creosote build-up," said Finney.

To lessen this problem, Finney suggested using aged, seasoned wood that will burn hotter.

Yet, even if there is no noticeable creosote, a chimney and fireplace should be professionally cleaned once every year.

"Sometimes a homeowner will only inspect the chimney from inside the home, but creosote can also form close to the top of the chimney, where the temperature is cooler and the

gases will cool quicker." **Where There's Smoke...**

Once you begin using your fireplace, take care to look for problems throughout the season.

"Smoke staining or other signs of inadequate venting could indicate numerous conditions or concerns," said Finney.

Some of these may include blockage of the flue, an insufficient smoke shelf, or design construction defects.

If any of these problems occur, homeowners are advised to seek professional help.

"The fireplace should not be used again until the problem is alleviated."

**Rekindling an Old Flame**

Rather than using magazines or newspapers to get your fire going, kindling is the most efficient fire-starting material. Some magazines and newspapers give off toxic smoke when burned due to the types of ink used in the printing process.

"Newspapers also send burning ashes up your flue that can ignite a dirty chimney or land on your roof while still aglow."

Flammable liquids, such as gasoline or lighter fluid, should never be used to start or rekindle a fire.

"Using these types of materials can cause an explosion."

**Wood burning Stoves**

Wood burning stoves have become popular in recent years since they can save on heating bills.

The new models of wood stoves are attractive and also provide an efficient source of heat for the home in case of a power outage.

Yet, wood stoves also require the same amount of preventative safety maintenance as a fireplace.

All wood-burning units should have adequate clearance from combustible materials and walls in order to prevent a potential fire.

Even if the unit is not close to combustible walls, a masonry wall may contain wood beams within it that could ignite at high temperatures.

This problem can often be alleviated by the use of special heat shields, said Finney. He also warns that stoves should not be set directly on a wooden floor or carpet as this can create another fire hazard.

"Fireproof material must always be used on the hearth and under the unit."

**Hearth Hints**

- Avoid smoldering fires; confirm that the fire is out.
- Never burn trash or higher flammable material that will produce a sudden, hot fire.
- Inspect your chimney monthly (even during the season) to check for creosote deposits or other problems.
- Avoid stove pipe accessories, such as heat reclaimers or extractors. They reduce pipe temperatures, adding to creosote build-up.
- Place a spark arrester at the top of the chimney - it prevents hot ashes from escaping the chimney, while animals, birds and rainwater are kept out.

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