

Fire Safety for Fireplaces, Wood Stoves and Chimneys

More than one-third of Americans use fireplaces, wood stoves, and other fuel-fired appliances as the primary heat source in their homes. Heating fires account for 36 percent of residential home fires every year. Often, these fires are due to creosote buildup in chimneys and stove pipes. Proper maintenance and common sense can go a long way towards making sure your fireplace or wood stove provides cozy warmth and not an uncontrollable fire. The Golden Fire Department strongly urges you to read over this information if you have a fireplace, wood stove or other fuel fire appliance.

Fireplaces

- Use a fireplace screen heavy enough to stop rolling logs and big enough to cover the entire opening of the fireplace to catch flying sparks. Keep the fire in your fireplace and not on your floor! If you have a glass door, use it only in accordance with manufacturer's recommendations and on approved fireplaces and inserts. Some glass doors need to be left open while the fire is burning. When glass doors are left open, a screen is needed.
- Clear the area around the hearth of debris, decorations and flammable materials like newspapers.
- Make sure the damper is open and check to see that the chimney is drawing the smoke up properly before starting your fire. To check the draw, first open a window a bit for ventilation. Either carefully hold a lighted match up to the flue and make sure the flame is drawn upward or light a small ball of paper in the grate, again making sure that the smoke is drawn up through the chimney. If the chimney doesn't draw the smoke up and out, have it cleaned and inspected by a certified professional before using it.
- Burn paper only when starting a fire and only in small amounts. Be aware that holiday gift wrap often contains chemicals that give off toxic fumes when burned.
- Never use chemicals or fuels to start a fire.
- Use only dry, seasoned wood or logs in your fireplace. Avoid evergreen branches, which can flare up quickly and throw sparks, or treated wood, which contains harmful chemicals. Soft, moist wood accelerates creosote buildup.
- When building a fire, place logs at the rear of the fireplace on an adequate supporting grate.
- Keep anything that can burn well away from a fireplace.
- Make sure the fire is completely out before leaving the house or going to bed.
- Cool hot ashes in water and place them in a tightly sealed metal container outside your house.
- Stack firewood outside at least 30 feet from your home.

Wood Stoves

- Wood stoves cause over 9,000 residential fires every year.
- When buying a wood stove, look for solid construction such as plate steel or cast iron metal. Check for cracks and inspect legs, hinges, and door seals for smooth joints and seams.
- When installing your stove, carefully follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Fire Safety for Fireplaces

- Your stove should sit on a code-specified or listed floor protector. The protector should extend 18 inches beyond the stove on all sides to reduce the possibility of the floor catching on fire. Use fire-resistant wall coverings like metal or brick if the stove sits near a wall.
- Follow the manufacturer's maintenance instructions. Check your pipes and chimneys monthly for damage or obstructions and clean them annually.
- Use only seasoned wood for fuel, not green wood, artificial logs, or trash. Trash could cause the stove to overheat.
- Never use gasoline or other chemicals to start a fire. Gasoline will ignite and explode.
- Use coal (or other fuels like pellets) in the stove only if the manufacturer has approved its use. Don't take the word of the salesman - ask to see the manufacturer's literature.
- Be sure to keep anything that can burn at least three feet from your wood stove.
- Never leave a fire unattended. Extinguish the fire before going to bed or leaving the house.

Chimneys

- Creosote is a highly flammable, black, tar-like substance that forms in burning wood, sticks to chimney walls, and builds up over time. Creosote buildup can ignite into a fire that could spread to your roof. A chimney cleaning gets rid of the creosote, so have your chimney cleaned at least once a year by a certified specialist. Have it cleaned more often if you use your fireplace or wood stove a lot.
- Along with a cleaning, have your chimney inspected annually by a certified specialist. Obstructions and cracks can cause chimney and roof fires. In addition, cracks in your chimney lining could allow a fire to escape into the wood frame of your house. If you've had a fire in your chimney, it will probably have cracks that need to be repaired.
- Place mesh screen spark arresters at the top of your chimney.
- Keep the roof clear of leaves, pine needles and other combustible debris.
- All chimneys and vent pipes should extend at least three feet above the roof.
- Remove branches hanging above and around the chimney, flues or vents.
- Provide proper venting for all heating equipment.
- Small children should be kept away from any heating source, especially open fires.
- Older children and teens should be told how to properly use (or not use) any fireplaces or wood stoves in your home.
- Install smoke alarms on every level of your home.
- Test your smoke and CO alarms as recommended by the manufacturer. At a minimum, test them at least once a month. Change the batteries as recommended by the manufacturer. At a minimum, change them at least once a year.
- Plan and conduct Fire Escape Drills with your family.
- Contact the Golden Fire Department Inspector at 303-215-8886 if you have any further questions regarding fireplaces, wood stoves or other heating appliances.