

THE HOME YOU OWN

# Everything to know about making your fireplace safe

Built-up soot, birds' nests, crumbling bricks — there are all kinds of hazards to check for before you strike that first match

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Updated November 7, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EST | Published November 2, 2022 at 11:45 a.m. EDT



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There's just something incomparably cozy about a stack of crackling logs on a chilly day, which is surely why fireplaces remain such a desirable feature in American homes. In 2018, the U.S. Census found that 44 percent of new builds came with a fireplace; the number in older homes is far higher.

Owning a fireplace, though, is a responsibility — and making sure it's in good shape for regular use is not an occasion for DIY experimentation. "This is one area where safety first really matters," says John Campitell, a project manager with Insite Builders & Remodeling in Bethesda, Md. "You'll need a professional chimney sweep or home inspector to check it out before you light that first log."

## Have your fireplace inspected

If you're under contract on a new place, make sure your home inspector thoroughly investigates the fireplace. "They can look for defects such as holes in the flue, hearths that are too small to protect the floor from hot ashes and sparks, or chimneys that are too short" (a fire hazard), says Nick Gromicko, founder of the International Association of Certified Home Inspectors. If you're already in your home, have a chimney sweep come every year to give your system a thorough checkup, from the firebox up to the chimney cap.

Sweeps will check for creosote (a potentially dangerous, tar-like substance that's a byproduct of wood fires), rusted flues and other common issues, including feathery or furry invaders. "Squirrel nests, bird nests — so many creatures can get down in your chimney and cause havoc," says Campitell.

## Have your fireplace cleaned

Your annual chimney sweep appointment should include a thorough cleaning. When hiring a sweep, look for one who's been [certified by the Chimney Safety Institute of America](#). The sweep should come armed with special long brushes to remove soot and creosote. Let too much of either build up in the flue — the lined, interior chute that connects the firebox to the chimney on the roof — and it can spark a fire.

Sweeps can also repair or replace the "cap" on the top of your chimney. Caps are protective devices that keep out animals, leaves and branches, while allowing smoke out and air in.

## Hire an independent contractor to make repairs

Chimney sweeps may suggest repairs (such as relining the chimney or replacing bricks), but you'll want to get another opinion or two, and hire a contractor or mason to handle the fixes. "Be leery of chimney sweeps who also sell repair services, for obvious reasons," says Gromicko. "You want someone who will be independent."



## Open the flue

After a chimney sweep or home inspector deems your fireplace safe, ask them to show you how to open the flue. If it's closed, it will be blocked by a little door called the damper, which is hidden out of view inside the flue.

The damper is there to either keep air out or allow it to flow in. It operates via the pull of a chain or the push of a lever (usually located at the top of the fireplace surround). It must be open when you start a fire, both so oxygen can feed the blaze and so the smoke escapes through the chimney.

## Get the right fireplace tools

There are thousands of fireplace accessories for sale — including leather log carriers and rhinestone bedazzled lighters — but the ones you really need relate to safety and efficiency.

- **Metal grate.** John Crouch, director of public affairs for the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association, recommends starting with a metal grate (basically a small metal stand for your wood). “It’ll allow air to come up under the logs and make them easier to start,” he says.
- **Wire or metal screen.** These prevent sparks from flying out of the fireplace. “You don’t want anything popping out,” says Crouch.
- **Shovel and broom.** Buy a fireplace tool set that includes a small shovel and broom for cleaning up cold ashes several hours after your fire goes out.
- **Small metal garbage can.** “I also recommend a little metal garbage can, some kind of container you use to get ashes out away from the house,” says Crouch. “You don’t think about that before you have a first fire, but you read news stories about people putting ashes in paper bags, setting them outside on a porch, and having their house catch on fire.”
- **Fire extinguisher.** “You’ll also want to keep a fire extinguisher nearby,” says Gromicko, “and make sure you have working, tested, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in the room.”

## **Build a roaring (but safe) fire**

The Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association has a [thorough guide to safe fire-building](#). A few of the most important takeaways include starting with a hearth free of old ashes; using dry wood; and never closing the flue or leaving the fire unattended until the embers have completely stopped burning.

To get your fire roaring, you'll also want to hone your log-stacking strategy. The basic idea is to arrange them in a way that lets oxygen and flames travel between the wood. One tried and true technique: creating a tent shape by putting kindling in the center, then leaning logs around it vertically, with their ends meeting in a point at the top. Another effective method: stacking parallel logs in two to three perpendicular layers.

## **Maintain your gas fireplace**

If you've moved into a home built in the past decade or so, chances are that any fireplace it came with is gas-powered. While these higher-tech hearths are generally easier to use and lower maintenance than their wood-burning counterparts, you should still be careful before flipping the switch for the first time. Call a plumber or a chimney sweep who services gas units to check for hazards, such as leaks in the gas line. Says Crouch: "It's a matter of making sure your connections are good."