

Maintaining and Using Chimneys Safely

When autumn comes and the temperatures start to dip, many people turn to their fireplaces to help stay warm. However, after months of inactivity, using your fireplace for heat without first maintaining and inspecting it can be dangerous—even deadly.

Because fireplaces and chimneys often stand idle during warmer months, it is important to have your chimney regularly swept and inspected by a certified professional to be sure that it is safe to use.

Risks of Chimney Fires

Chimney fires can be lethal. Temperatures can reach 1,100° C and emit radiant heat through the chimney walls, which is especially dangerous for buildings with wooden or thatched roofs. Chimney bricks can even get hot enough to cause nearby flammable materials to catch on fire, such as thatch or wood products.

Chimney fires usually occur for four main reasons:

1. Infrequent sweeping and cleaning
2. Burning unseasoned wet wood
3. Improper sizing of the appliance
4. Burning or smouldering wood in wood burners for long periods or overnight

Neglecting to perform regular maintenance and inspections on your chimney could cause a devastating fire that destroys your entire building. If you are a private homeowner, you could lose your home. If you are a landlord, you may be responsible for arranging chimney maintenance, and thus could be liable for any fires started due to insufficient chimney maintenance and lax safety.

Sweep Your Chimney and Check Your Flues

Your chimney and flue need to be swept in order to remove deposits that build up from burning carbon-based fuels such as wood, gas, oil and smokeless fuels. Chimney sweeping ensures that there is a safe and clear passage for the gases that result from using your fireplace, reducing your chance of a chimney fire. Sweeping a chimney also removes objects such as nests, cobwebs and loose or broken brickwork that could obstruct air flow.

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Chimneys and flues can cause carbon monoxide poisoning if they are not regularly swept and inspected, since carbon monoxide is produced when carbon-based fuels are burnt. If your chimney or flue is not clean, the fuel will not burn as efficiently and dangerous levels of carbon monoxide can accumulate. This dangerous gas can leak out of the chimney and poison people nearby.

Keeping your chimney and flue clean is essential to stopping fires before they start. Use the following tips to keep your chimney and flue clean and safe all year long:

- Sweep the chimney regularly.

Provided by **Crendon Insurance Brokers Ltd**

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- Only burn wood with a moisture content of less than 17 per cent.
- Use an appropriately sized appliance for the room with the fireplace.
- Do not overload the grate or appliance.
- Build smaller, hotter fires that burn completely—they produce less smoke.
- Never burn cardboard boxes or waste paper in the fireplace.

Detecting a Chimney Fire

Chimney fires are extremely dangerous, but there are some signs and symptoms that can help you recognise when one is forming before it causes major damage. Some of these signs and symptoms are listed below:

- A loud roaring noise from the fireplace opening
- Sparks and flames shooting from the chimney top, resembling fireworks
- A glowing or shimmering outlet or connector
- Flames visible through tiny cracks in the outlet or connector
- A vibrating appliance, outlet or connector
- Noticeable smoke or smells in adjoining rooms or the loft space

Unfortunately a chimney fire can happen without exhibiting any of these characteristics—which is why regular maintenance is so important.

If you have a chimney fire, call the fire service immediately. After contacting the fire service, follow these four steps:

1. If the fire is in a wood-burning stove, shut all air vents and flue dampers to reduce the fire's oxygen supply. Do not pour water on the fire.
2. Move any flammable materials, furniture or decorations away from the fireplace.

3. Check if the chimney breast throughout the house is getting hot. If so, move furniture away from it.
4. Clear the area around the fireplace and chimney so firefighters can access it.

If you do not feel safe inside, get out of the building.

After a chimney fire has been extinguished, the chimney should be inspected as soon as possible by a certified chimney sweep. Do not use the chimney until it has been examined and any necessary repairs have been completed.

Maintenance Saves Lives

Performing recommended chimney and flue maintenance throughout the year and after long periods of inactivity is simple. With only a few instances of easy, routine maintenance, you can save a building before it goes up in flames—you may even save someone's life. Contact the insurance professionals at **Crendon Insurance Brokers Ltd** today at **0121 45 45 100** for more help in securing the safety of your property.



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