

## Keep Your Fireplace Clean For Winter Safety

**Q:** *I use my masonry fireplace often during winter to cut my utility bills. The draft seems to be getting weaker. What chimney problems should I look for when I inspect it and how can I reduce creosote?*

**A:** Tens of thousands of chimney fires occur every year due to creosote buildup and other problems with chimneys. In many cases, the entire house ends up burning down and many lives are lost. Chimney fires result in as much as \$200 million in property losses each year.

Since you have noticed reduced draft up the chimney, schedule an appointment with a professional chimney cleaner. If

you are lucky, the screening in the chimney cap will just be clogged with soot. This blocks the air flow up the chimney. Tapping the screening with a rubber mallet can knock the soot loose.

If you are not as lucky, there may already have been a creosote fire inside your chimney. The heat from the fire can cause the tile liner to crack and fall from the masonry wall. When this happens, the broken tile may

restrict the air flow up the chimney, reducing the draft. You see a broken loose tile when looking down the chimney with a bright light.

A chimney fire also can cause the creosote to puff up. It expands and feels somewhat like plastic cooler foam. If you can run a brush down the chimney, some of this puffed creosote may fall down into the firebox. If you find either a broken tile or puffed creosote, your chimney will need a professional cleaning and inspection with a camera.

If repairs are needed, get estimates from several chimney maintenance companies.

There are some things you can do to reduce creosote buildup. Use well-seasoned wood and do not try to choke off the combustion air too much to

extend the burn time.

Special fireplace logs are available that contain chemicals to reduce creosote formation in the chimney. Using these periodically can help keep the chimney clean. SaverSystems—(800) 860-6327, [www.saversystems.com](http://www.saversystems.com)—offers a spray to use on regular wood logs and other cleaners to minimize creosote.

You occasionally can clean the chimney yourself, but this does not eliminate the need for a professional inspection. A local chimney supply store should carry a brush to fit your chimney.

Always wear a high-quality breathing mask so you do not inhale the fine dust particles. Seal the fireplace opening into the room with plastic film and duct tape. Also, put a large drop cloth on the floor in front of the hearth. No matter how well you try to seal it, some black dust seems to always get through.

Go up on the roof and run the chimney brush up and down many times. Wear a safety harness and tie yourself to the chimney when on the roof and always have someone nearby to call for help if needed.

Much of the hazardous damage to chimneys is caused by moisture entering from outside. Moisture can migrate through the brick and the mortar joints into the chimney. This is bad everywhere, but particularly in cold climates with freeze/thaw cycles during winter. Use a water- or solvent-based sealer on the chimney bricks and mortar.

The crown of the chimney is another location for moisture to enter. Tap on it lightly with a hammer to locate any loose areas and brush them away. If the crown is still in good condition, coat it with a special elastomer crown repair compound.

Check the condition of the mortar joints. Where you find loose mortar, fill in the gaps with an elastomer concrete-colored sealer. Also, inspect the flashing where the chimney meets the roof. Deteriorated areas can be sealed with a flexible flashing repair compound. ■



**This patch system repairs and seals the flashing around the base of the chimney. A piece of mesh is covered with a tough polymer material that adheres well.**

Photo courtesy of SaverSystems



To ask a question, write to **James Dulley**, Energy Report, 6906 Royalgreen Dr., Cincinnati, Ohio 45244, or check his Web page, [www.dulley.com](http://www.dulley.com).

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