

# Keep Your Fireplace From Going Up in Smoke

**M**ost of us enjoy sitting in front of the fireplace on a blistery winter eve. We are there because it's comfy, it's romantic...and because the rest of the house is freezing. One reason the rest of the house is freezing is that the fireplace is sucking far more heat up the chimney than it is radiating into the room. Everybody considers a fireplace to be a major sales feature in a home. But it's best to be realistic about this – a fireplace is just another heating system that, like any heating system, can burn you if you are not wary. Right now, before the heating season, is the best time to correct deficiencies in all of your heating systems. For our grandparents, a fireplace was probably the only heating source in the house and its main food preparation appliance as well. Today, any fireplace without a heat recovery ventilator system must be considered a recreational item at best. A roaring, crackling fire can draw three to four hundred cubic feet of air right up the chimney every minute. That's air we have paid for the privilege of heating and air we are counting on to keep our family comfortable whenever anyone ventures from the near vicinity of the fireplace!

Fortunately, there are solutions, including heatilators, glass doors, and air intakes that provide outside air for combustion. That way, the draft for the fireplace is isolated from the rest of the house. But with any fireplace there are a number of things to look out for. Unless the fireplace is operating, you can't determine how it will draw. But this can be a problem in any house that is highly insulated and air tight. In an effort to cut energy costs, many of us have sealed our homes to such an extent that there may not be enough fresh air available to feed and exhaust a furnace, gas water heater and fireplace at the same time.

A fireplace chimney should also be checked carefully. Poor construction, infrequent maintenance, settling of the house, or a family of squirrels or birds, can lead to trouble. Even those energy-efficient metal inserts need to be checked. When I'm doing a home inspection on the roof, I always inspect the chimney from above. If the chimney cap, liner or bricks have deteriorated and fallen into the flue, there can be serious problems. I also look for installations where the fireplace and gas furnace both use the same flue. This is quite dangerous. A lot of homes have gas units inserted into existing fireplaces, which eliminate overheating of the room. The logs may be ceramic, but the system is efficient and cost-effective. Natural gas and propane models are also available which do not require a stainless steel flue liner, or even a chimney. Fresh air for combustion and exhaust gases both come from the outside via a small-diameter pipe through the wall. If your home has a regular fireplace and you have a taste for a real log fire from time to time, stick your head up the chimney prior to each heating season. Creosote build-up from the burning of wood, particularly green or soft wood such as pine, can cause a nasty chimney fire. If the walls of the chimney appear not to be clean, call a chimney sweep and you could be saving your life.