

This year, a clean sweep

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The Maryland state fire marshal is taking steps to ensure safety this season as families turn on the heat and light the yule log.

Fifty fires resulted in 71 deaths in 16 Maryland counties and Baltimore city in 2010, according to a report compiled by the state fire marshal's office.

Four of those deaths were related to heating systems and combustible materials near the systems.

"Space heaters are a big problem all the time," said Bruce D. Bouch, deputy state fire marshal. "People keep them too close to combustibles, they aren't well-kept or are placed in a small environment to begin with."

Portable electric space heaters, wood stoves, kerosene heaters and fireplaces should have a 3-foot clearance from anything that can burn, including clothing, mattresses, bedding, furniture and paper.

But the leading factor contributing to home heating fires is dirty, poorly maintained systems, according to a report by the National Fire Protection Association.

Chimney fires are a common and easily avoidable result of improper maintenance.

"Achimney should be inspected after a cord of wood has been burned in the stove or fireplace," said Larry Miller, owner of Chimney Care Plus LLC in Frederick.

Certified chimney sweeps like Miller can assess creosote buildup and clean out the chimney if necessary. Prices vary based on the size of the chimney and the amount of buildup.

"Each scenario is different," Miller said, adding that the draft and chimney altitude are factors. "It may need to be cleaned as often as once a year, or as little as once every 20 years."

Chimneys need a tile, concrete or aluminum liner to prevent fires that may ignite due to creosote buildup if a chimney is not kept clean.

Creosote -- a sticky, oily, combustible substance created when wood does not burn completely -- will coat the inside of a chimney. Failure to have a chimney inspected and cleaned can have severe consequences, as one of Miller's clients learned.

The client's chimney had been cleaned the previous year, but due to either the type of wood being burned or frequent use, there was a large buildup of creosote.

The substance went up in flames, which reached out of the fireplace, setting the mantel alight and destroying it.

"Creosote builds up and can catch fire, and if the internal temperature reaches over 1,100 degrees, the flue tiles may crack," Miller said.

Frederick County has not reported a single death due to improper maintenance of heating equipment in the past two years.

A cooking fire claimed the life of one woman this year, the only fire-related death reported from January to June.

In 2010, two people died in the county in separate fires. One man died in an apartment fire attributed to careless smoking; another was the victim of a heating-related fire in a house.

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Photo by Adam Fried

Larry Miller, owner of Chimney Care Plus LLC, installs a chimney cap at a Middletown home Thursday afternoon.

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