

Copyright Free Newsletter Articles

Content for Homeowners

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Topic: Safety – Fire
Suggested title: Chimney Safety

There's nothing as serene as a warm, crackling fire on a cold, winter night. There's also nothing more dangerous if your chimney is damaged.

Broken or cracked chimneys can let heat, smoke and toxic gasses, such as carbon monoxide, into your home. Your home could even catch fire. Chimney damage is often obvious, but sometimes it can be hidden. Use the following checklist, provided by Ready Virginia!, to help ensure that you can enjoy your fireplace and avoid problems—or even a disaster:

- Check to see if bricks have fallen or the chimney is leaning.
- Look for shiny areas on your exterior metal chimney pipe. This could mean the chimney has shifted—during the recent East Coast earthquake, for instance.
- Look for cracks at joints where the chimney connects to the firebox, at the roofline and in the attic.
- Check for debris that may have fallen into the fireplace.
- Use a screwdriver to check the mortar between the bricks or stones. If it crumbles when you pick at it, the chimney may be a hazard and probably needs work.
- When in doubt, consult a licensed engineer or contractor. For the name of an inspector, call your insurance or mortgage company.

Remember, disasters can happen even in the best of homes. That's why every home should be equipped with carbon monoxide and smoke detectors. Here are a few tips:

- Install carbon monoxide and smoke detectors in sleeping areas and on every level of your home and away from air vents. Interconnected smoke alarms are best, because if one sounds, they all sound.
- Test smoke alarms monthly, and change alkaline batteries at least once a year. Use a familiar date, such as your birthday or when you change your clocks, as a reminder.
- Prepare and practice a fire escape route with everyone in your home, including children.

For more information, visit www.usfa.dhs.gov/smokealarms.

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Topic: Health
Suggested Title: Snow Removal: Watch Your Back

Lower back strain is one of the most common injuries related to shoveling snow. The following measures can help you prevent injuries and keep your back healthy while shoveling:

- Before the first snowfall is predicted, make sure you have a proper shovel. The best shovel is one that is light weight, ergonomic and has a curved handle. Your shovel should also be long enough so that you can avoid bending over while shoveling and short enough so that the load on the blade when you lift it is close to your body.
- Make sure that you have other essential equipment, like warm, waterproof and skid-proof boots, as well as gloves, a hat, a coat and sunglasses to protect against glare.
- Warm up before you start shoveling by walking around for five or 10 minutes, then stretch your arms, legs and back.
- If possible, shovel when the snow is fresh rather than after it has been packed down and is heavier.
- If the area you need to clear is large, shovel in stages starting with the most critical path first.
- Switch hands often, and keep your hands separated with one hand closer to the blade.
- Keep the loads light, rather than piling large amounts of snow on your shovel blade. If the snow is deep, shovel in layers.
- Avoid bending and twisting as you lift, and empty each shovel full of snow. When possible, push the snow to one side as you clear the path.
- Avoid throwing snow off the shovel blade, especially over your shoulder.
- Take a break every 15 or 20 minutes to straighten and stretch your back.
- Stay hydrated.
- Stretch again when you are finished shoveling. If you do experience any back strain, apply ice packs for the first 24 hours, then apply heat to loosen the muscles.

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Topic: Board Candidates
Suggested Title: We Want You!

You're committed to bettering our community, so why not put that passion to work and run for a spot on the association board.

The association will soon be holding elections for board members, and we're looking for dedicated homeowners like you to help us shape and implement our governing rules, handle association finances, make important decisions that affect the entire community and much more. If you're interested in running for the board, please speak with a board member to find out more information, including responsibilities of the open positions and how to get your name on the ballot.

Working on the board can be an enriching experience and can help you make lasting, positive changes to the community. So start campaigning today for a chance to earn a seat on the association board.

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Topic: Maintenance – Household
Suggested Title: Simple Stain-Removing Solutions

Try as you might to prevent them, spills, drips and splatters in your house are inevitable. Whether you, your family or your guests are the culprits, stains happen. Most, if not all, are treatable, especially if you act quickly and use the right stain-removing technique.

If there's an accident on your carpet or a rug, start by scooping up any solids and soaking up any unabsorbed liquids. Then, blot the stain with a white cloth or paper towel. You should work from the outside in so you don't spread the spill, and dab at it instead of rubbing or pressing hard.

You also can try spot cleaning with a soapy water mix. Dilute a ¼ teaspoon of clear hand-dishwashing soap with 1 cup of lukewarm water. Spray the solution on the stain, and mist the area with clean water or blot with a wet towel. Then blot the area with a dry towel. Repeat this process until you get as much residue out as possible.

Follow these specific instructions for cleaning up the more stubborn stains and sticky spots on your floors:

- Red wine: Begin with the same three steps—blot, apply soapy water and rinse. Then, dribble very hot water from a sponge onto the spill. Continue to blot with a clean towel, and repeat until the carpet no longer shows any red.
- Soft drinks and coffee: Begin with the same three steps—blot, apply soapy water and rinse. Then dab on hydrogen peroxide. Wait one hour before repeating the process. Hydrogen peroxide bleaches a stain without breaking down carpet dyes. Use a 3 percent solution, which can be found at a drugstore, and apply at full strength.
- Candle wax and chewing gum: These are easiest to remove when hot or cold. For the cold method, harden the spot by rubbing it with an ice cube inside a plastic bag. Then, carefully scrape off the residue with a dull knife or a plastic card, such as an expired credit card. For the hot method, apply paper towels over the waxy area, and then use a clothes iron on low heat to soak up the wax. Replace the paper towels until all the wax is removed. Use a hair dryer to heat gum. Then with a plastic bag over your fingers, pull the goo off.

So the next time your carpeting endures a nasty spill, rest assured that it doesn't have to become a permanent stain. With these simple tips, you can keep your carpets and rugs looking great for years to come.

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Topic: Safety – Fire
Suggested Title: Keep the Home Fires (Safely) Burning

One of winter's great pleasures is relaxing in front of a warm, cozy fire. For most months of the year, however, the fireplace stands idle, and these long periods of disuse can lead to hazardous conditions when you light your first fire of the season.

Your fireplace needs regular care and cleaning to assure a safe and roaring fire. Creosote, a flammable, tar-like substance that accumulates in the firebox, chimney and flue, should be removed by a professional once a year, eliminating the worry of a potential fire hazard. Your chimney should also be inspected annually to ensure there are no structural problems.

Clean your fireplace and its accessories regularly to prevent the accumulation of soot, ashes and creosote tars. The following guidelines will help you keep your fireplace in good working order throughout the wood-burning season:

- Vacuum or sweep the hearth weekly to prevent dust and soot buildup. Do not sweep or vacuum until all embers have been extinguished for at least 12 hours.
- Burn only well-dried, seasoned wood to minimize dangerous creosote buildup and reduce the risk of toxic fumes and excessive smoke.
- Don't use water to drown a fire except in case of an emergency. Water will make a paste of the ashes, which is difficult to remove.
- Don't use an abrasive cleanser inside the fireplace; many such cleaners leave a flammable residue. Instead use a stiff-bristled brush to gently scrub the walls of the firebox.
- When cleaning your fireplace, sprinkle damp coffee grounds over the cooled ashes to keep down the dust.

For more tips on fireplace care and maintenance, as well as kerosene heaters, wood-burning stoves and furnaces, download the U.S. Fire Administration brochure, *Winter Fires: Safety Tips for the Home*, at www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/fa-249-508.pdf.

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Topic: General
Suggested Title: The Games Kids Play—and Debate

Kids love to play games, which can be a great source of entertainment, bonding, learning and friendly competition. But when those silly rules get in the way, and games become prolonged arguments among siblings or friends, it often means the end of the game, upset children or even a physical altercation.

There is a way to avoid the great game debates—at least most of them.

A number of websites provide rules for many games—from Capture the Flag and Simon Says to Ghost in the Graveyard and Duck Duck Goose. There are even rules for the simple game of tag. Or is it that simple?

You can also learn new games. Ever hear of Honey, Do You Love Me or Doggy, Where's Your Bone? How about Sock Wrestling, Slug Bug or Dead Box? Curious about Punch the Icebox or Sardines?

Visit www.gameskidsplay.net, or type “kids games” into your search browser to find other sites, and let the games begin—without any arguments about the rules.

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