

Chimney Inspection Preparation Checklist

Everything you need to do before, during, and after a professional chimney inspection

- ✓ Pre-inspection preparation checklist (12 items)
- ✓ What to expect during each inspection level
- ✓ Understanding your inspection report
- ✓ Annual maintenance calendar and safety essentials

Pre-Inspection Preparation Checklist

Before Booking the Inspection

- ☐ Determine whether you need Level 1 (annual), Level 2 (real estate/damage), or Level 3 (suspected structural)
- ☐ Note the last time the chimney was inspected and/or cleaned
- ☐ Identify your chimney type: masonry, prefabricated/factory-built, or metal
- ☐ Note any concerns: smoke entering the room, unusual odors, visible cracks, water leaks, CO detector alerts

Day Before the Inspection

- ☐ Do NOT light a fire for at least 24 hours before the inspection (chimney must be cool)
- ☐ Open the damper (if accessible) so the inspector can evaluate it
- ☐ Move all furniture, rugs, and decorations at least 3-4 feet from the fireplace
- ☐ Clear the mantle of any items that could be damaged by dust or debris
- ☐ Place a drop cloth or plastic sheeting over nearby furniture and flooring if concerned about dust
- ☐ Ensure the inspector has clear access to the fireplace/stove and any cleanout doors
- ☐ Clear access to the roof if the inspector needs rooftop access (remove obstacles near ladder placement)
- ☐ For Level 2: ensure the inspector has access to the attic, crawlspace, and any areas where the chimney passes through the building

Day of Inspection

- ☐ Ensure smoke and CO detectors are installed and functional (inspector may check)
- ☐ Have your list of concerns ready for the inspector
- ☐ Confine pets to a separate room

☐ Plan to be home for the inspection (typically 45 min to 2 hours)

Critical: Let the chimney cool for 24+ hours before inspection.

A hot chimney is unsafe to inspect and impossible to clean properly. Avoid fires for at least 24 hours before your scheduled appointment.

What to Expect During the Inspection

The Inspection Process — Step by Step

Level 1 Inspection

- 1 Exterior walk-around (10 min):** Inspector examines the chimney from ground level — checking masonry condition, cap, crown, and visible flashing.
- 2 Firebox inspection (10 min):** Inspector evaluates firebrick condition, mortar joints, damper operation, and smoke chamber.
- 3 Flue inspection from below (10 min):** Using a flashlight from the firebox, inspector checks for visible creosote buildup, obstructions, and liner condition.
- 4 Flue inspection from above (10 min):** From the roof, inspector removes cap and inspects the flue from the top down with a flashlight.
- 5 Connections and clearances (10 min):** Inspector checks appliance connections, thimble condition, and clearance to combustible materials.
- 6 Findings discussion (10 min):** Inspector shares initial findings and recommendations on-site.

Level 2 Inspection

- 1 Video camera scan (20-30 min):** Camera inserted into flue from top or bottom. Records condition of every inch of flue liner, joints, and interior surfaces.
- 2 Attic and concealed space inspection (15-20 min):** Inspector checks where chimney passes through attic, walls, and crawlspace for clearance violations, deterioration, or fire damage.
- 3 Detailed report preparation (delivered within 24-72 hours):** Written report with photos, video stills, findings, and repair recommendations per NFPA 211.

Total time on-site

Level 1: 45–60 minutes. Level 2: 1.5–2.5 hours. Level 3: 3+ hours (may span multiple days if demolition is required).

Understanding Your Inspection Report

How to Read Your Chimney Inspection Report

Key findings and what they mean

Finding	Severity	What It Means	Typical Repair Cost
Stage 1 creosote (light, flaky)	Normal	Standard buildup; removed during sweep	Included in cleaning
Stage 2 creosote (shiny, hard)	Moderate	Higher risk; needs professional chemical/mechanical removal	\$200-\$400 (above standard sweep)
Stage 3 creosote (glazed, tar-like)	High — fire hazard	Extremely flammable; chimney fire risk. May require specialized removal	\$300-\$500+ for removal
Cracked flue tiles	High	Heat and combustion gases can escape to combustibles	Liner replacement: \$1,500-\$5,000
Missing or damaged cap	Moderate	Water, animals, debris enter flue	Cap replacement: \$150-\$700
Deteriorated crown	Moderate-High	Water enters chimney structure; accelerates deterioration	Crown repair: \$150-\$2,000
Spalling bricks (flaking/crumbling)	High	Structural deterioration from moisture/freeze-thaw	Tuckpointing: \$500-\$2,500
Damaged flashing	Moderate-High	Water leaks at roof junction cause interior damage	Flashing repair: \$200-\$700
Clearance violation	High	Combustibles too close to chimney; fire hazard	Correction: \$200-\$1,000+
Blockage (nest, debris, collapse)	Critical	Carbon monoxide risk; complete obstruction of exhaust	Removal: \$150-\$500

Carbon monoxide is the invisible emergency.

A blocked or cracked flue can allow CO to enter your home — the #1 cause of accidental poisoning deaths in the U.S. If your inspection reveals a blockage or cracked liner, stop using the fireplace immediately and prioritize repair.

Creosote: The Homeowner's Guide

Understanding Creosote Buildup — The #1 Chimney Fire Cause

Three stages of creosote

Stage	Appearance	Fire Risk	Removal Method	Prevention
Stage 1	Light, flaky, soot-like	Low	Standard chimney sweep (brush)	Normal; managed with annual cleaning
Stage 2	Shiny, hard, brittle flakes	Moderate	Mechanical removal + chemical treatment	Burn dry, seasoned wood; ensure good airflow
Stage 3	Thick, glazed, tar-like coating	Very High — chimney fire waiting to happen	Specialized chemical treatment; may require repeated applications; sometimes liner must be replaced	Prevent by burning only seasoned hardwood with proper draft

What causes creosote buildup

Factor	How It Increases Creosote	Solution
Burning unseasoned (wet) wood	Moisture creates more smoke and condensation	Use only wood dried 6–12 months (< 20% moisture)
Restricted air supply	Smoldering fires produce more creosote	Open damper fully; provide adequate air intake
Cool flue temperatures	Smoke condenses on cool flue walls	Insulate exterior chimneys; avoid small, smoldering fires
Burning softwood (pine, spruce)	Higher resin content = more creosote	Burn hardwoods (oak, maple, ash) primarily
Oversized flue for the appliance	Smoke cools before exiting	Have a professional evaluate sizing; liner may help

The best creosote prevention: burn hot, burn dry.

Use only seasoned hardwood (moisture content below 20% — test with a \$20 moisture meter). Burn briskly with the damper fully open. Small, smoldering fires are the #1 cause of dangerous creosote buildup.

Annual Chimney Maintenance Calendar

Month-by-Month Chimney Care

Seasonal schedule

Season	Task	DIY or Pro	Cost
Spring (March-May)	Annual inspection + sweep (best time — off-season)	Professional	\$200-\$400
Spring	Check chimney cap for winter damage	DIY visual check	Free
Spring	Check crown and flashing for cracks/gaps	DIY visual check from ground	Free
Summer (June-Aug)	Schedule any repairs found during spring inspection	Professional	Varies
Summer	Apply waterproofing sealant if recommended	Professional	\$200-\$600
Summer	Stock seasoned firewood (should be drying 6-12 months)	DIY	Wood cost
Fall (Sept-Nov)	Pre-season check: verify damper operates, cap intact, no obstructions	DIY or Pro	Free / \$100-\$200
Fall	Install or check chimney cap animal screen	DIY or Pro	Free / \$150-\$500
Fall	Test smoke and CO detectors; replace batteries	DIY	\$10-\$30
Winter (Dec-Feb)	Burn only seasoned hardwood with damper fully open	DIY	Ongoing
Winter	Clean out ash when it reaches 1 inch (leave 1-inch ash bed for insulation)	DIY	Free
Winter	Check for smoke entering the room (indicates draft problem)	DIY observation	Free

The #1 scheduling tip: inspect in spring, not fall.

Most homeowners wait until September/October, creating a 6-week bottleneck. Spring inspections mean faster scheduling, potential off-season pricing, and time to complete any repairs before heating season.

Safety Essentials Every Homeowner Should Know

Chimney Safety Quick Reference

Critical safety rules

Rule	Why It Matters
Install CO detectors on every level (especially near bedrooms)	A cracked flue or blockage can silently leak carbon monoxide into your home
Never burn treated, painted, or manufactured wood	Releases toxic chemicals and accelerates creosote buildup
Keep a fire extinguisher within 10 feet of the fireplace	Class ABC extinguisher for emergency response
Never leave a fire unattended	Embers can escape; logs can shift and fall
Use a fireplace screen or glass doors	Prevents sparks from reaching carpet, furniture, or children
Open the damper BEFORE lighting a fire	Smoke and CO will enter the room if damper is closed
Close the damper when fireplace is not in use	Prevents heat loss and animal entry; saves energy
Test smoke detectors monthly	Early warning for chimney fires or flue problems
Keep combustibles (furniture, curtains, wood) 3+ feet from fireplace	Fire code requirement; prevents radiant heat ignition
Have your chimney inspected annually	Catches problems before they become emergencies

When to STOP using your fireplace immediately

- Smoke enters the room when damper is open (blockage or draft failure)
- Cracking or popping sounds from the chimney (possible chimney fire)
- Strong creosote smell without a fire burning (buildup / flue issue)
- CO detector alarm (evacuate; call 911)
- Visible damage to flue liner (from Level 2 inspection video)
- White staining (efflorescence) on exterior chimney bricks (moisture intrusion)

ChimneyAdvisor

ChimneyAdvisor

1. ****Printability matters.**** Homeowners print these. Avoid large solid color areas on interior pages (waste ink). Reserve full-bleed backgrounds for cover and back cover only. 2. ****Tables are the star.**** These guides live or die on their reference tables. Make tables scannable, well-spaced, and easy to read at 100% zoom on screen AND when printed on letter paper. 3. ****Checklist pages should be fun**

Find inspectors at chimneyadvisor.com