

Be aware of fireplace smoke as chilly overnight temperatures and holidays approach

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PIMA COUNTY, Nov. 20, 2023 -- Cooler nighttime temperatures and the approaching holiday season mean an increase in fireplace use in many neighborhoods throughout Pima County. If your celebration includes lighting a fire in the fireplace, it may feel comforting, but for some people fireplace smoke can make it very hard to breathe.

Wood smoke contains tiny particles and toxic pollutants that can harm people with heart or respiratory disease, babies, young children, and pregnant women. Pollutants in wood smoke can also cause the eyes, nose, and throat to burn with irritation, and even cause headaches, nausea and acute bronchitis.

“It is common for particulate matter levels to increase during the holidays due to more people burning wood in their fireplaces for warmth or comfort,” said Natalie Shepp, Environmental Planning Manager with the [Pima County Department of Environmental Quality](#). “Unfortunately, wood burning can also contribute to health problems, especially in sensitive populations.”

Walking in neighborhoods where fireplace smoke is heavy may cause an irregular heartbeat, chest pain and shortness of breath in susceptible people. In homes where wood-burning fireplaces are used, smoke can make asthma symptoms worse and cause lung inflammation and pneumonia in young children.

In addition, fireplaces are not very efficient for heating your home. Most homes are not perfectly insulated, so cold air slips in under doors and through cracks as hot air rises and escapes up the chimney. If flues are not properly installed and maintained, particles released during wood burning can escape into the home.

The Environmental Protection Agency provides [“burn wise” information](#) on their website to help reduce the impacts of wood burning in your home. They also recommend upgrading your wood burning device to a cleaner, more efficient [wood-burning appliance](#).

Placing multiple large candles in the firebox may provide a substitute for the flickering flames ambiance you are looking for without the problems associated with burning wood.

For those who use the fireplace as their sole source of heat, or otherwise choose to burn wood, PDEQ recommends following these tips to reduce the risk:

- Have chimneys cleaned seasonally to reduce creosote buildup.
- Burn hardwoods like oak, mesquite, and pecan instead of soft woods like cedar, fir, or pine. The wood should be split and dried for at least six months.
- Use smaller pieces of wood. They burn more efficiently and are a better source of heat.
- Allow enough room inside the fireplace for air to circulate freely around the wood.
- Never burn garbage, plastics, painted wood or plywood, charcoal, or printed pages in a fireplace. They will release toxic materials into the air.
- Occasionally, check your chimney from the outside while the fire is going. If you see smoke, your fire is not burning hot enough. Give the fire more air and then check again.
- Check before you light a fire to see if local air pollution levels are elevated. If they are, avoid using the fireplace, if possible. Check out [EPA's AirNow website](#) to access real-time air quality information.

Remember: If you can smell smoke, you and your neighbors are breathing smoke!

The Pima County Department of Environmental Quality monitors air and water quality and hazardous and solid waste programs that minimize waste and prevent pollution. PDEQ also provides public outreach, education, and citizens' assistance; processes environmental permits; and responds to public complaints and inquiries with investigations and enforcement.

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