

January 2006

Bust the Dust in Your Fireplace

Scenario: Cold winter nights entice you to burn wood in your fireplace to keep warm and for its cozy, crackling pleasure value. Most of the wood smoke (often much of the heat too) is emitted up the chimney into the air. People outside (and inside) breathe the particles of soot and ashes. Wood smoke contains hundreds of chemical compounds and nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, organic gases, and particulate matter. Breathing smoke is harmful to human health, especially to the young, old, pregnant women, and people with respiratory or heart disease. Among many ailments, it can cause or aggravate lung disease, coughing, shortness of breath, eye irritation, asthma, bronchitis, and emphysema.

Question: Knowing that breathing particulates is not good, what can people do to still have fires in their fireplace and be environmentally friendly?

Answer: There are lots of options to have fires in your fireplace while helping to reduce air pollution. Your options broaden if you are burning fires more for ambiance as opposed to being the sole source of heat for your home.

- Have fires less frequently. Refrain from having them when not needed, especially during overcast nights when pollution tends to be trapped at breathing level;
- Use hard wood like mesquite, oak, or pecan. Avoid soft woods such as pine, cedar, or fir. Hard woods burn hotter and form less soot and smoke;
- Use seasoned, dry wood (split and dried for at least six months). Green or wet woods create excess creosote and smoke;
- Never burn painted wood, wood treated with preservatives, plastics, charcoal, or colored paper. These items produce highly toxic pollutants when burned;
- Make sure there is enough room in the firebox for air to circulate freely around the wood;
- Go outside and check your chimney frequently. If you see smoke coming out, you're wasting wood by not burning it hot enough. Give the fire more air and check the chimney again;
- Install and use U.S. Environmental Protection Agency-certified woodstoves, fireplace inserts, and natural gas fireplaces. They emit considerably less air pollution than traditional fireplaces and woodstoves; and/or
- Light several candles in your fireplace instead of burning wood. It may not give off much heat, but it does add to the ambiance in your home.

Be considerate of your neighbors (and your own) lungs and follow some of the options listed above to help keep our air healthy to breathe. Our actions make a difference...especially for those at highest risk.

Questions or Concerns? Click or call: <www.deq.pima.gov/air/pcneap/Dust_info.htm>, e-mail <karen.wilhelmsen@deq.pima.gov>, or 740-3340.

Got Dust? Keep it Down!