



MINIMIZING YOUR RISK OF CABIN FIRES

Fire is possibly a cottager's biggest fear, in part because it can start so innocently and because it can flare and spread so rapidly. Here are 6 areas of the cabin where you can reduce the risk of fire.

APPLIANCES AND WIRING

We love the old stuff inside our cabin, but Grandma's flip-down toaster may have worn-out wiring or a frayed cord with exposed wires that can cause sparks and ignite nearby combustibles. Original wiring in walls may not be adequate to handle the number of modern appliances—space heaters, anyone?—in use these days. Basically the circuit is trying to carry more power than it was designed for, and the extra heat generated can wear out internal wiring and cause a fire. You'll know your electrical system is overloaded if the lights dim when you turn on an appliance or if you have to unplug one appliance in order to operate another without tripping the circuit breaker. Always make sure space heaters are turned off when you go out and unplug space heaters before leaving your cabin for an extended period of time.

Move power-hungry devices to a different plug, or install an additional plug in the high-use area. And of course, replace worn cords on your appliances, or discard the appliance. Your breaker box is designed to shut off the current when circuits become overloaded, but if the connections are loose, old, or worn, they may not activate the switch. You'll know if the lights go out but the breaker switch doesn't trip. If not, or if your circuit breaker is still not tripping, hire a pro to investigate, and consider replacing the breaker panel.

FIREPLACES, WOODSTOVES, AND CHIMNEYS

Another common cause of chimney fires is creosote buildup from incomplete combustion or smoke condensing on the inside of the chimney. Creosote is highly combustible and a fire inside the chimney (you'll hear a big roar) can spread to the cottage structure, especially if the chimney lining itself has cracks or holes.

You should inspect chimneys, flues, and flue pipes at least annually, and clean and repair them if necessary. The best way to reduce flaming debris is to burn only seasoned wood and not fill the firebox with paper or garbage.

LIGHTING

Like other electrical products, lamps have cords that can deteriorate over time plus a heating source—read fire hazard—in the bulb.

Prevent it If you have old lamps (and you probably do, because this is a cabin, right?), make sure your new bulbs are equivalent to the specification on the fixture to prevent the bulb from overheating and melting the socket. When you replace a shade, keep in mind that the higher the bulb wattage, the larger the shade needs to be for adequate ventilation. Finally, do we need to say it? Don't drape cloth, paper, or anything else flammable over the shade.

OPEN-AIR BURNING

Outdoor fires can fling sparks into the surrounding brush or can become out of control. They are also a hazard if not properly extinguished.

Pick a spot that is at least three meters from logs, stumps, trees, and other combustible sources (remember to look up) and 15 meters from any buildings. Fire can spread underground, so scrape the area right down to the soil, and clear out any brush. Have water and a shovel nearby. When you extinguish the fire, douse it and the ground with water, and stir the embers with the shovel, until the ashes feel cool.

PROPANE

Propane tanks are extremely strong and resistant to bursting. But if a tank is heated and the pressure inside increases beyond what the safety release valve on the tank can expel, it can rupture. A nearby flame or spark can cause the released gas to ignite.

Check gas lines in your barbecue or propane appliances regularly for wear, such as cracking and leaks.

DAMAGED WIRING

Where's the fire? Animals and storms can wreak havoc on outdoor wiring and receptacles, which, when damaged, can spark and become fire hazards.

When you open up in spring and after a storm, walk around your property to check for downed lines or chewed or frayed outlets and wires.