

You're a *what*?

# Chimney sweep

**D**on't know your damper from your flue? Chimney sweep Dawn McDermott will be happy to explain the difference. She can also inspect a fireplace's working parts, clean your chimney, and provide other repairs and maintenance related to chimney upkeep.

With 26 years in the chimney-sweep business, Dawn knows chimneys inside and out. She's happy to clarify for customers who might confuse the duct that vents gases to the outside (the flue) with the adjustable plate that regulates airflow (the damper). "They may not know the terminology," she says, "but I still have to explain what they need to know."

Dawn considers customer education part of her job. Increased understanding encourages chimney safety, which in turn helps to prevent fires and other hazards associated with fireplaces, woodstoves, and heating systems.

For example, chimney fires often occur when residue from wood-burning smoke accumulates inside the flue. Buildup of this smoke residue, called creosote, can become so thick and solid that it reduces airflow in the flue, creating even more smoke and leading to more creosote deposits. Eventually, these deposits harden into a highly flammable glaze.

A chimney sweep—also called a "sweep"—inspects chimneys as well as cleans them. Some inspections are for a specific purpose, such as home appraisal, but most precede cleaning. "Inspection tells me a lot," says Dawn. "If you've got a 13- by 13-inch chimney opening, but it's got so much buildup that the only opening left is a pinhole, I can see right away there's a problem." A sweep might also discover that a chimney has structural flaws or shows signs of deterioration.

Inspections often start on the rooftop, but cleaning usually begins inside the home. And for conscientious sweeps like Dawn, that means preparing the work area first. "It's a dirty job," she says, "but we never touch anything with

dirty hands. And we leave no dirt behind." Placing tarps over flooring and, if necessary, moving furniture out of the way helps minimize the mess.

After the tarps are down, chimney sweeps bring in their equipment: rods, wire brushes, attachments of various lengths and sizes, a high-powered vacuum, and special lighting. Sweeps also wear protective gear, including goggles and a respirator, to prevent soot from getting into their eyes and lungs.

The cleaning equipment is designed to give sweeps access along walls, into corners, onto ledges, or into other hard-to-reach areas inside chimneys. With the help of bright lights, chimney sweeps use their brushes and vacuum attachments to scrape and suction soot from inside the flue. Ideally, cleaning is done regularly enough that a worker can easily sweep the chimney—hence the occupation's title—before the soot becomes glossy and combustible.

But when creosote hardens, it bonds like glue to surfaces and can't be scraped off; in fact, attempting to chip away the solid buildup could cause structural damage to the chimney. In those cases, sweeps apply a chemical to the glaze to break it down over several days, after which they return to vacuum out these deposits. A third appointment is required to apply a chemical neutralizer and do a final sweep. For especially thick buildup, chimney sweeps may need to schedule additional appointments.

Dawn and her associate try to limit traveling time by scheduling each day's appointments within a single ZIP code. From September through January, their busiest season, they usually work 10-hour days 5 days a week. But that doesn't mean they're idle the rest of the year. "Spring and summer are actually the best time to sweep," says Dawn. "Removing all the surface soot gives relief to people who are allergic to it, especially when it's worse in the hot, humid summer months." It's also easier to

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get an appointment when they're not booked for months in advance.

Chimney cleaning requires a certain level of dexterity, because the job includes a lot of climbing, squatting, kneeling, and stretching. Some of the work involves risk, too, such as of falls from walking on roofs or health problems from inhaling soot. But, Dawn says, "If you're doing everything the way you're supposed to, then you'll be OK."

Although it can be dangerous, most routine sweeping usually isn't too time consuming. A typical inspection and cleaning takes from 20 minutes to an hour, says Dawn, but additional time depends on "whether the job is really bad or really simple, whether getting to the chimney requires one ladder or two, and whether it's cleaned annually or hasn't been cleaned in 5 or 10 years." Inspection helps determine how long the job will take.

Most time estimates also include a cost estimate. The National Chimney Sweep Guild says that homeowners should expect to pay up to \$300 for routine inspection and sweeping, depending on geographical, structural, and other factors. Many sweeps, including Dawn, charge less than that for most services. And sweeps may charge more for complicated jobs that require extra appointments, repairs, or equipment.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) does not have wage or employment data specifically for chimney sweeps. (Chimney sweeps are included in BLS estimates for the all other building cleaning workers occupation.) According to the guild's most recent membership survey, annual revenue of a typical chimney sweep company is between \$100,000 to \$250,000. Of an estimated 5,000 chimney-sweep companies nationwide, the guild has about 1,100 member companies, most of which have been in business more than 20 years and have 2 to 3 full-time employees.

Chimney services are largely unregulated. And few States license sweeps, although most require them to carry liability insurance. Furthermore, sweeping requires little training or money for startup, so entering the occupation is easy. Joining the guild and getting certified through the Chimney Safety Institute of America and the National Fireplace Institute

are ways for sweeps to establish themselves as qualified professionals.

Other than the institutes' seminars and workshops, there are no formal credentialing programs specific to chimney sweeping. Still, says Dawn, most sweeps are self-employed and need to know more than how to clean chimneys. "There's a lot of paperwork," she says. "You need to be able to keep good books." Basic math skills are important for accounting, doing taxes, and pricing products to stay competitive. Communications skills are essential for advertising and customer relations.

Dawn has an associate degree in business management. She took over Mr. Joe's Chimney Sweep Services, her father's business in Allentown, Pennsylvania, when he decided to retire after the business was well established. It was then that her business training came in handy.

It was in becoming a business owner-operator that Dawn understood the importance of maintaining the solid reputation that her father had built. A new customer once told Dawn that, when she was with six friends and asked if any of them knew of a reliable chimney sweep, all six replied in unison, "Mr. Joe's!"

"Unfortunately, the lack of requirements means anyone can buy a few tools and claim to be a chimney sweep," says Dawn. "It's nice to know that ethics, honesty, and reliability really do matter."

