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Could Your Dryer Catch on Fire?

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February 28, 2005



Kym Richardson

Clothes dryer fires are one of the most common causes of house fires. Last year, more than 17,000 house fires were caused by a clothes dryer, costing homeowners more than \$95,000,000 in damages. Last month, NewsChannel 19's own Kym Richardson was one of those homeowners whose house caught fire because of a dryer. She shares information she's learned on how to prevent a dryer fire.

It's one nightmare millions of homeowners hope never come true, but for thousands it does--watching their home go up in flames. Unfortunately, I was one of those homeowners. However, I was more fortunate than many fire victims. My house didn't burn to the ground. There was a lot of smoke and water damage, but nothing that can't be fixed. My family is displaced for a while, but we will be able to go back home.

So how can you avoid ending up in this same situation?

"It boils down to the homeowner. They have to maintain the maintenance to that dryer and dryer vent," said Madison County Assistant Fire Marshall, Tony Deversa.

"The lint buildup is the most common cause of a dryer fire," said Deversa.



Preventing a Dryer Fire in Your Home

Many homeowners clean the inside lint trap in their dryer, but most don't stop to think about cleaning the lint in the exhaust duct. That's where fires start.

"You've got to understand you have an ignition source here. You have 220 volts, 30 amps, heat strips, just like a toaster--anything that gets caught in there is going to ignite."

Another problem, many older homes, like mine--and some new ones--have a plastic exhaust pipe connected to the dryer. This in itself is a fire hazard.

"Once that clogs up and a fire occurs, it's going to melt very, very fast," said Deversa.

So what type of exhaust pipe should you use? Fire investigators recommend sheet metal.

Another major cause of dryer fires is the distance lint has to travel from the dryer vent to blow outside the house. If lint has to travel through an exhaust that's under a floor or up through walls and is more than 6-feet long, it's almost impossible to get it all blown out.

"I would make sure it's on an exterior wall which would make for a shorter vent pipe," said Deversa.

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One more fire hazard you need to be aware of: the shutter where the lint blows to the outside of your home. Fire investigator Tony Deversa says a shield over the vent is not your best option. He recommends something that has louvers, a device you can buy at most home improvement stores.

"You can look at a glance and see if it's clogged," said Deversa.

For many houses, it doesn't take much to clean the exhaust, just a few minutes, several months of the year.

If you don't feel comfortable cleaning the exhaust yourself, you can always call a duct company. Most aren't very expensive, and it's money well spent.

Something else homeowners need to remember: never go to sleep with your dryer running, and don't leave the house with your drying running.

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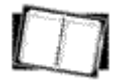
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