

AROUND THE HOUSE

Watch for electrical fire hazards

Home is where the heart is, says the old adage. Unfortunately, homes are also where the hazards are. Almost 100 percent of the homes we inspect have electrical defects. While age plays some role, the majority of the defects we find are created by weekend electricians — that's right, you, the homeowner.

The following is a list of potential electrical fire hazards along with ways to correct the problems:

1. Extension cords are typically smaller than the amperage rating of the permanent wiring that they extend. This can cause the wire to heat up long before the fuse blows or circuit breaker is tripped. Dan Smits, a fire investigator for the Chicago fire department, says improper use of extension cords is a leading cause of house fires.

2. Extension cords shouldn't be put below carpeting due to possible damage. Nor should they be installed permanently because they could be damaged by the staples, etc. This feel of "permanence" could create an atmosphere where it could be used for appliances that will overload the wire. Extension cords shouldn't be installed through floors or walls because of their vulnerability to damage.

3. Wire splices should only be

installed in prescribed boxes and mechanically secured. Exposed splices may become loose and cause arcing and possible fire or shock.

4. Service entrance cables with deteriorated outer coverings will allow water to enter and may follow the cables into the meter socket and possibly into the main panel box. This will cause corrosion. It may also cause circuit breakers to freeze in the "closed" or "on" position. This is a significant fire hazard. The service entrance cable should be replaced when the outer covering is deteriorated. (No sir, duct tape or electrical tape isn't an appropriate repair!)

5. Broken or loose switches and outlets should be replaced because their dependability is suspect and the occupants may be exposed to shock.

6. Breaking or cutting off of the ground prong of a three-prong plug won't affect the operation of the appliance. However, it does compromise the safety of the user.

7. Dimmer switches should be checked for excessive heat. The rating of the dimmer should always be higher than the total wattage of the bulbs it serves. Dimmers with ratings 50 percent to 100 percent above the total bulb

wattage are desirable.

8. Light fixtures and related shades and covers can deteriorate quickly if the bulbs used in the fixture are larger than the fixture rating. Fires can result.

9. Circuit breakers that won't trip or are "buzzing" are a problem. It may be related to moisture, corrosion or inexpensive or incompatible equipment, but it must be corrected as soon as possible.

10. Electrical panels should be readily accessible. Don't cover the panel cover with paneling or drywall and avoid placing immovable objects in their path.

11. Incandescent lighting close to clothes or other combustibles in closets may create a fire hazard. Bulbs should have covers and should be a minimum of 12 inches from combustible material.

12. Fuses and circuit breakers shouldn't be altered by homeowners. Their vital purpose is to protect the wire they are attached to by keeping it from overheating.

Oversized fuses or circuit breakers don't enhance the electric circuitry or the equipment they serve. Some people may be under the impression that the

larger fuse/circuit breaker will allow that line to hold more. The integrity of the wire is compromised from overheating. The entire circuit is compromised, not just at a fixture or connection.

This should never be allowed to happen. If it does, it should be corrected as soon as possible.

Other concerns

Other areas of concern include double-wired circuit breakers, reversed polarity at outlets, ungrounded outlets, the lack of ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs) at wet areas, and miscellaneous workmanship compromises. These are all safety-related situations and should be addressed.

If you (or a prior homeowner) have done some of your own wiring, you probably have some corrections that are needed.

A licensed electrician can evaluate your system for usually less than \$100. The electrician should be able to find problem areas and offer you options.

Around the House, by the AmeriSpec home inspection service, 1378 S. Main, Plymouth, instructs homeowners about the basics of home maintenance and repair.

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Tips for a more secure home.



✓ Keep house keys with you on a separate ring. It's a common racket for burglars to take jobs as parking lot attendants just to have access to house keys to make quick copies.

✓ While you're out, don't leave notes on the door telling when you'll be back. It's another signal to burglars and they'll know exactly how much time they have to do their dirty work.

✓ If you're thinking of installing a pet entrance... don't! Burglars have been known to squeeze through them to get into a home. If you already have a pet entrance, it would be a good idea to block it up, or at least try to make it smaller.

✓ Don't try to discourage a pushy salesperson by saying you are on your way out or busy packing to go away. This may be exactly what he or she wants to hear.

✓ While you're out of town, leave a car in the driveway, if possible. If you have a garage, make sure the door is closed and windows covered so no one can tell if it's empty.

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