

How Safe Is Your Home From Electrical Dangers?

by *The Leviton Institute*

We treasure our homes as a safe and cozy place where we can relax with family and friends. But there may be invisible hazards hidden behind your walls or lurking unseen outdoors that threaten your safety and that of your loved ones. With May being National Electrical Safety Month, now is a good time to find out just how safe your home is from electrical hazards.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, there's plenty of reason for concern: nearly 32,000 fires in the home were caused by faulty house wiring or wiring devices each year between 1999 and 2002. These fires resulted in 220 deaths, 950 injuries, and \$674 million in property damage annually.

Now for the good news -- there is something you can do to safeguard your home from dangerous electrical hazards. The Leviton Institute recommends you hire a qualified electrician to make a thorough inspection of your house and grounds every ten years. You should also make your own yearly inspection a part of your regular spring chores. It's easy -- just follow this list:

1. Outdoor GFCIs:

Make sure all outdoor receptacles are protected by Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters (GFCIs) and a weatherproof cover. With warmer weather just around the corner, pools, hot tubs and barbecues are going to start getting a lot of use. Make sure pool pumps, hot tubs and appliances you use outdoors are plugged into GFCI-protected outlets. These will safeguard your friends and family from dangerous electrical shock. GFCIs detect when current is leaking from an electrical circuit to ground and automatically shut off the power at the receptacle. They have saved hundreds of lives since they were first introduced in 1972 according to the National Electrical Safety Foundation. When choosing a GFCI, it's important to note that Underwriters Laboratories (UL) is updating its requirements for these devices this summer. New models will be introduced that offer greater protection by automatically blocking the reset button (ensuring that no power is available) if they are improperly wired. All GFCIs produced after July 28, 2006 will include these new features, although GFCIs made before then may still be offered for sale after that date. With both newer and older models, it is important to periodically test (according to the manufacturer's instructions) your installed GFCIs to make sure they are still working properly.

2. Indoor GFCIs:

Kitchens, bathrooms, laundry rooms, or any other place around the house that has a water source within six feet of the receptacle needs GFCI protection. Remember: water and electricity are a potentially deadly combination. Keep appliances like radios or hair dryers away from sinks, tubs, and pools.

3. Defective Wiring Devices:

Check outlets and switches for cracks, broken parts, or loose-fitting plugs. Replace defective devices immediately, as well as those that feel hot to the touch.

4. Overloaded Outlets:

Make sure outlets are not overloaded. Most household outlets are typically rated around 15-20 amps. Plugging too many appliances into one outlet can exceed that rating and create a fire or shock hazard.

5. Visual Inspections:

Inspect all power cords and extension cords: those showing signs of cracking, fraying, or obvious wear should be replaced immediately.

6. Extension Cords:

Never run extensions under rugs, carpets, or furniture where damage might occur unseen and start a fire. When using an extension cord, always plug the appliance into the extension cord first before plugging the extension cord into the outlet.

7. Light Bulbs:

Be sure to replace a burned-out light bulb with one that doesn't exceed the recommended wattage for the lamp socket.