

Preventing Electrical Burns

If you see that an appliance has frayed wires, don't try to fix it.

According to the website for Electrical Safety Foundation International:

- Home projects have become more and more popular as people have become confident in their ability to save money by taking on do-it-yourself projects. In 2005, for example, the home improvement market made about \$280 billion, double what it had been in 1995. But at the same time, emergency rooms reported a surge in visits when those do-it-yourselfers were hurt by either using home workshop equipment or while trying to work on their home electrical systems.
- More than 19,700 people are injured every year by ceiling fans that have been mounted or sized incorrectly.
- Between 2003 and 2005, 89 percent of all electrical fires were caused by an electrical failure.
- Almost 400 people in the U.S. are accidentally electrocuted every year. Approximately 14 percent of those deaths were caused by damaged or exposed wiring, including household wiring.
- In addition, a staggering 4,000 people are injured by electrical outlets.

Things got worse during and after the Great Recession when people were trying to save money. No matter how

tight your budget is, you don't want to become part of the statistics. After all, the least expensive accident is the one that never happens. That being the case, what's the best course of action to take?

Following basic safety rules can be a help:

- Always think seriously about hiring a professional electrician instead of doing the work yourself.
- If you decide to tackle a project, make sure you aren't in over your head. Understand your home's electrical system, and don't try anything that is beyond your skill level.
- Turn off any power to the circuit. This can be done by going to the main service panel and turning off the correct circuit breaker. Test wires to make sure they have no power before you actually touch anything.
- Unplug appliances and lamps before you work on them.
- Don't touch plumbing or gas pipes when you are working on electricity.

You can prevent accidents by inspecting the following:

- Outlets and switches
- Extension cords
- Appliances





In rooms where there is a possibility that water could come into contact with electricity, you should also think about installing a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI).

Outlets and Switches

Thousands of injuries and household fires have been caused by faulty electrical outlets and switches. What can you do to make them safer?

- Look for any switch that is hot, smoking, or sparking. Have them inspected by a professional electrician as soon as possible.
- If you have young children, use socket covers to prevent them from sticking anything into the outlet, and teach them that electricity is dangerous. Don't allow them to play with wall switches or electrical outlets.
- If you use power strips, make sure they have surge protectors on them as well, and don't put more of a load on the outlet where you've plugged in the power strip than it can reasonably handle.
- Look at the outlets in your home and consider how you are using them. Do you frequently trip circuit breakers or blow fuses? Are you overloading any outlets?

Extension Cords

Extension cords cause many electrical burns and injuries.

If you have pets or children, inspect your extension cords regularly to make sure no one has been chewing on them, and keep the cords away from them as much as you can. Limit your use of extension cords; if you don't need one, don't use it. Only buy extension cords that were made in accordance with safety standards and that have been rigorously tested; look for OSHA or UL labels. Replace any extension cord as soon as it begins to look worn.

Appliances

When you are using any electrical appliance, it is important to do so carefully. Just picking up a hair dryer when your hands are wet can be enough for you to be subjected to a strong electrical shock. If you see that an appliance has frayed wires, don't try to fix it. If it is inexpensive, then replace the entire appliance. Otherwise, have an electrician take a look at it to tell you whether you are better off having it repaired or replaced.

GFCI

Why should you think about buying a GFCI? If you have an appliance that could come into contact with water — and in the kitchen and the bathroom, that's probably exactly what you have — then you also have an appliance that could cause an electrical burn. The GFCI can automatically cut off power from the circuit if water is present.