

Mike Holmes: Handling electrical work tricky for homeowners

You know that I always recommend hiring an expert to do any kind of work in your home. I sometimes get nervous when I hear from homeowners who have taken on their own projects — but especially when it comes to their electrical wiring. If you don't know what you're doing, someone could get seriously hurt — or worse.

If there's one thing I can teach homeowners about electrical work: it's not a DIY job. Electrical fires are common and make up about 15 percent of all fires in Canada. Don't take the chance; bring in an expert. It's some of the smartest money you can spend on your home.

Hiring an electrical contractor

Hiring your electrician is like hiring any other contractor. You will want to interview a lot of them and always ask them for references. You want to actually check those references and look for reviews online. Make sure they're licensed and certified. A licensed electrician will be able to tell you the kind of work your home needs. Remember that any time you touch your electrical setup, you will need to get a permit. Without it, you or your electrician could be heavily fined.

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Before you start any renovation, you will want to have your electrical setup checked, if it hasn't been inspected recently. Most renovations require some kind of electrical work, whether it's a bathroom, kitchen, or basement. If you have unanticipated updates to make to your wiring, it could lead to unnecessary delays in the project. Contractor schedules fill up quickly — especially during the summer months.

Inspecting and maintaining your electrical

You may find that opinions vary on how often you should have your electrical systems inspected. Some people will say 10, or even 20 years is sufficient. For me, that's not good enough: I would have mine checked every four years. Electrical parts can wear out like anything else, and building code gets constantly updated.

Just because you don't see any issues doesn't mean you shouldn't have preventative inspections performed. It will be the best couple hundred bucks you could spend on your safety.

One piece of maintenance you can handle on your own is testing your ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCI). GFCIs are used to reduce the risk of electric shock and should be tested monthly. Plug a light into your outlet and switch it on. Press the test button on the outlet. If the light goes out and the reset button pops out, your GFCI is working. If the reset button pops out, but the light stays on, it's been wired improperly and you'll want to call your electrician. If the reset button fails to pop out, your GFCI is defective and should be replaced.

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Don't forget surge protection

A whole house surge protector helps reduce the electrical fluctuations that happen on your circuits. Connecting to your electrical breaker box, a surge protector helps keep your box and your electronic devices safe from being damaged by surges or electrical strikes.

You might think that a power surge will never happen to you. I did, too, and I learned my lesson the hard way. After a large electrical surge entered my house, I lost all of my electronics that were plugged in, including a brand new TV. Believe me, that one hurt.

After I replaced everything, I installed a surge protector to keep that from happening again. Remember, it's always better to prevent the surge damage from occurring than it is to replace everything.

Electrical safety is something you always want to keep on the top of your mind. By selecting good products, performing regular tests, and hiring the right experts, you'll have a setup that you can count on. The way to make it right is to make it safe.

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