Inspect electrical cords


Photo by SrA Lakisha Croley

Extension cords, with their ability to bring any appliance or lamp within easy reach of an electrical outlet, are one of the most convenient products in the home. But when they are misused, they can also be a source of potential danger.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) estimates that some 3,000 people are treated each year for injuries associated with extension cords. In addition, the CPSC reports that improperly functioning extension cords cause 5,000 residential fires annually.

While extension cords are an invaluable convenience, it's important to use them properly. But what does that entail?

To make your home as electrically safe as possible, you should take a few minutes each year to inspect the condition of your electrical cords, extension cords, plugs, and outlets. Here's what you should look for:

First, keep your eyes open for any electrical cords that are worn or damaged. Statistics show that two-thirds of all electrical fires are caused by these items. Replace any electrical cords that are in poor condition.

Next, check all electrical plugs to make sure they fit snugly into their outlets. Plugs that are loose or that wobble in the outlet are potential fire hazards, and should be repaired or replaced.

Also make sure that you or another family member haven't forced any three-prong plugs into a two-slot outlet. Appliances with three-prong plugs should only be inserted into three-slot outlets or three-slot extension cords.

Outlets, too, can pose a safety hazard if they are worn or damaged. Should you find any in this condition, you should replace them as soon as possible. Also, check that all cords between power supply, extension cords, and wall outlets are secure and that there are no exposed blades (prongs).

Take a moment to gauge the temperature of the faceplates on your electrical outlets. If a plate is warm or hot to the touch, it could indicate a potentially serious wiring problem that should be further investigated by a qualified electrician.

In addition, take note of any switchplates that are discolored. Discoloration could indicate that the electrical wiring behind the switchplate is overheating. Inspect all switchplates in the same manner, testing to see if they are warm.

Finally, make sure that you have not overloaded any circuit or extension cord. Remember that extension cords are not intended to permanently extend a home's wiring system.

Between these annual inspections, you should be alert to the performance of your electrical system. Here are some telltale symptoms of home electrical wiring problems:

- Household lights that dim or flicker, or a TV picture that shrinks in size
- Evidence of arcs, sparks, or flashes of bright light in the electrical system
- Sizzling or buzzing sounds emanating from the electrical system
- Damaged, cut, broken, or cracked wire insulation
- Frequently blown fuses, or circuit breakers that trip frequently

Before any work is done on your electrical system, always disconnect power from the circuit breaker panel or fuse box before attempting to replace a worn or damaged wall outlet (or call a qualified electrician to perform the work).

Editor's Note: *For more information visit http: // www. electrical contractor.netSafety_Education_Page.htm*