

MAFES Dawg Tracks

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Safety Tips: Extension Cord Safety



Extension cords are so handy when we need them, **but** like everything else involved with work and projects, they have their drawbacks. The big one that I observe is that instead of being a temporary fix, they become a fixture.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) estimates that each year there are approximately 4,000 injuries associated with extension cord use that are treated in hospital emergency rooms. Approximately one-half of these injuries involve fractures, lacerations, contusions, or sprains from people tripping over extension cords. Their study also revealed that approximately 13 percent of these injured were children less than 5 years of age. Electrical burns to the mouth accounted for one-half the injuries to young children.

The CPSC also estimates that approximately 3,300 residential fires originate in extension cords each year, killing 50 people and injuring about 279 others. The most frequent causes of these fires are short circuits, overloading, damaged cords, and general misuse.

A revised standard that has been in effect for several years now requires most extension cords to have polarized plugs. Polarized plugs, as we know, have one blade slightly wider than the other and can be inserted or "plugged" into a socket only one way. Polarization and grounding ensure that certain parts of appliances that could have a higher risk of electrical shock when they become live are instead connected to the neutral, or grounded, side of the circuit. Such electrical products should only be used with polarized or grounding type extension cords.

The CPSC has a list of recommendations for the purchase and use of extensions which follows:

- Use extension cords only when necessary and then on a temporary basis.
- Use polarized extension cores with polarized appliances.
- Make sure that cords do not dangle from table tops where they can be pulled down or tripped over.
- Replace cracked or worn extension cords with new #16 gauge cords that have the listing of a nationally recognized testing laboratory, safety closures, and other safety features.
- With cords lacking safety closures, cover any unused outlets with electrical tape or with plastic caps to prevent the chance of a child making contact with the live circuit.
- Insert plugs fully so that no part of the prongs is exposed when the extension cord is free.
- When disconnecting cords, pull the plug rather than the cord itself.
- Teach children not to play with plugs and outlets.
- In locations where furniture or beds may be pushed against an extension cord where the cord joins the plug, use a special "angle extension cord," which is specifically designed for use in these circumstances.
- Never use an extension cord while it is coiled or looped.
- Never cover any part of a cord with newspapers, clothing, rugs or any objects when the cord is in use.
- Never place an extension cord where it is likely to be damaged by heavy furniture or foot traffic. Don't use staples or nails to attach extension cords to a baseboard or to another surface. This can possibly damage the cord and cause a shock or fire.
- Don't overload extension cords by plugging in appliances that draw a total of more watts than the rating of the cord.
- Use special, heavy duty extension cords for high wattage appliances such as air conditioners, portable heaters, and freezers.
- When using outdoor tools and appliances, use only extension cords labeled for outdoor use.
- Use only 3-wire extension cords for appliances with 3-prong plugs. Never remove the third (round or u-shaped) prong, which is a safety feature designed to reduce the risk of shock and electrocution.