

Understanding Your Electrical System Can Help You Spot Problem Areas

by Phoebe Chongchua

Electricity is the kind of power we love when it's working and hate when we're having problems with it. Understanding some basics about electricity and homes can help you, whether you're checking out a home to buy or getting ready to put your home on the market.

I spent some time with David Zedaker, owner of Zed Electric, getting current on a few basic electric areas to check out in your home.

Check out the electrical panel. It's a good idea to explore a home's electrical panel. Here you can discover just how much oomph the home has.

"Typically a 50 or 60 amp electrical service was all that older houses needed and today's standards call for a minimum of 100 amps and, depending on the size of the home or the amount of electrical appliances installed, a 200 amp would be advisable," says David Zedaker owner of Zed Electric.

He says a good rule of thumb to apply to determine if you need a 100 or 200 amp service is to consider the size of the home; if it's 3,000 square feet or larger, a 200 amp service is an absolute necessity. "A 100 amp service can only support up to two large electrical appliances such as electrical water heaters, whole-house air conditioners, electric stoves, electric cook tops and ovens, electric dryers, and portable electric spas," says Zedaker.

Here's how you can check on the amps. "As you open the circuit breaker panel where the electrical meter is located, there will be a number of black switches inside known as circuit breakers and one of those will be larger than the others and it's known as a main disconnect. That main disconnect will have numbers on the side of it or on the face of it displaying the rating of that electrical service," says Zedaker.

Get grounded. "Many homes built before the sixties feature a two-wire system -- an ungrounded wiring system with two-prong outlets. That is still acceptable by the code today as many of our devices that we plug in have a two-prong cord anyway -- things like table lamps, floor lamps, clock radios, television sets, and those sorts of things. However, many new devices like computers or large kitchen appliances and laundry appliances require a grounded plug or a three-prong plug and that would then require a third-wire in the electrical system," explains Zedaker.

He says that many homeowners will attempt to change the outlet by simply changing the faceplate of the electrical outlet from two prongs to three prongs without actually having it rewired properly. "That in fact creates an even bigger problem because then you have a false sense of security with a three-prong outlet in the wall that really in truth is not grounded," says Zedaker.

You can check to see if the outlet is properly grounded by using a very inexpensive outlet polarity

tester. "It cost about \$3.50 at your hardware store. You can plug it into an outlet and it will tell you by a series of illuminated lamps on the front whether or not the outlet is properly grounded or if it has what we call a 'reverse polarity' where the wires are actually switched backwards," says Zedaker.

Look for damaged outlets and exposed wiring. See if you spot damaged outlets, worn or loose switches, or unprotected or exposed wiring. "Under the eaves of a new home, or a home that's on the market, or in the garage area, you can see a lot of 'weekend warrior' type wiring -- if it's exposed then it hasn't been installed properly and it's subject to damage that way," says Zedaker.

Check for ground fault interrupt (GFI) protection. "GFI outlets can be installed very quickly by a licensed electrician in bathrooms, kitchens, garages, and the home's exterior," says Zedaker. He says this upgrade is inexpensive but important for safety reasons.

The GFI outlet has two push buttons in it. "This outlet senses a shock hazard. Say, for instance, you go to pick up your hairdryer and your hands are wet or slightly damp, this device senses that shock potential and shuts the outlet off before the circuit breaker could trip," says Zedaker.

Electrician certification. Finally, if you find you need work done, don't just hire anyone or you may run the risk of getting a shoddy job.

Many states are now requiring that electricians be certified. Zedaker says it's important for consumers to ask to see the electrician's certification. "Most certified electricians are required to carry a card in their wallet," says Zedaker.

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