

New York Daily News - <http://www.nydailynews.com>

Wired for trouble

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Sunday, July 23rd, 2006

When the thermometer threatens to hit triple digits - like it has recently - New Yorkers become more vulnerable than ever to electrical fires.

Air conditioners are big electricity eaters - they can push old wiring past the danger point.

So can the other appliances you're using when you stay indoors to beat the heat.

If you're using more electricity than your old wiring was meant to handle, you could be baking the insulation right off the wires - a fire hazard in the making.

Houses and apartments that are more than 50 years old are especially vulnerable to electrical fires unless they've been rewired recently, said John Drengenberg of Underwriters Laboratories, a nonprofit safety testing organization.

Old homes weren't wired to handle all the energy-eating appliances that people use today, he said.

"The wire doesn't melt by itself - it's being overtaxed," Drengenberg said.

The problem is particularly worrisome in a city like New York where many buildings are old.

Faulty wiring and light fixtures cause fires in 32,000 homes nationwide each year. Make sure you aren't harboring a potential killer in your walls, Drengenberg said.

Danger signs

- SHOCKS from touching appliances, outlets or wall switches point to a potential hazard.
- HOT CORDS, plugs, outlets or wall switches - which you can't keep your hand on for more than five seconds - are a danger sign.
- FLICKERING OR DIMMING LIGHTS - or the smell of burning metal or plastic - mean loose or faulty wires, overloaded circuits or arcing and sparking inside the walls.
- IF FUSES BLOW - and blow again when replaced - or circuit breakers keep tripping after you reset them, you have a problem with your wiring.
- If your bathroom and kitchen outlets don't have built-in CIRCUIT INTERRUPTERS, you're in danger of electrocution.
- If you have more than one HIGH-WATTAGE APPLIANCE plugged into an extension cord, you're drawing more current through your wiring than you should.

Appliances that generate heat use lots of power - irons, toasters, toaster ovens, waffle irons, Foreman grills and especially space heaters, John Drengenberg said. A very bright lamp takes a 100-watt bulb - when you use a hair dryer, it's like plugging 15 lamps into one socket.

An air conditioner's a big power eater. Don't plug it into an extension cord unless it's made specifically for them.

Also, if you've stapled extension cords to baseboards or hidden cords under rugs, you're creating fire hazards.

- SHRINKING OR WAVERING TV and computer screens are a sign that your home isn't getting enough power.
- If hanging light fixtures have BULBS THAT ARE BRIGHTER than the fixtures were designed to use, you're overheating the wires in your ceiling.

Fixtures come with maximum wattage recommendations - which may be illegible on old fixtures. If this is the case, don't use bulbs of more than 60 watts, Drengenberg said.

What to do

- Stick with LICENSED ELECTRICIANS or electrical contractors for rewiring and repairs. City law requires you use them for most jobs.
- If you own your home, BRACE YOURSELF - electricians' estimates are usually free, but rewiring is big-ticket work.

Adding an outlet with a circuit interrupter costs anywhere from \$300 to \$800, one local electrician said.

Increasing your power capacity costs from \$1,800 to \$2,500 to get the additional juice to the house, plus an estimated \$1,100 to install new wiring in each large room.

Replacing old wiring costs an estimated \$6,500 to \$8,000 for a two-family house.

- If you're a renter, first CALL YOUR SUPER or landlord. If you don't get help, call 311 - and explain very specifically what's wrong, said Neill Coleman, spokesman for the city Housing Preservation and Development department.

The 311 operator will figure out whether to route your complaint to HPD or the Department of Building's Bureau of Electrical Control, he said.

- RENTERS BEWARE - your landlord is not legally obligated to rewire to provide more power to your apartment, said attorney Daniel Finkelstein of Finkelstein Newman, an expert on landlord and tenant law. The building owner is required to keep the existing electrical system in good repair.

If you're buying a home

- Hire a HOME INSPECTOR who is certified in electrical work. Get referrals at www.NACHI.org - the Web site of the National Association of Certified Home Inspectors.
- Ask the inspector if there's ENOUGH ELECTRICAL CAPACITY TO POWER a modern home - and if there's not, to estimate the cost of adding power.
- If the home needs rewiring, "you have a bargaining chip with the seller to LOWER THE PRICE," John Drengenberg said.