

Pinecrest

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Power trip: Ares, sparks and buzzes

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The newspaper story says that a house or a business in your community burned down last night. The fire department says the fire started in an electrical panel. In some cases, people in the house fire die or sustain serious injury because they didn't wake up in time. The fire at the business site will put the owner out of commission until repairs and reconstruction occur.

Is there a way to avoid such fires that start in electric panels? Yes, if you pay attention and practice preventive maintenance.

Here are some tips for homeowners:

- Place your hand on the panel. If you feel heat, there's a problem. A fire is waiting to happen.

- If you hear arcing and sparking around the panel, there's a problem. The arcing and sparking lead to a meltdown of the electrical cable and connections, and eventually to a fire.

- If you hear buzzing around the panel (and you see no bees), there's a problem.

For all the danger signals listed above, contact a licensed electrician. Have your electrician look for faulty insulation in the wiring and for required tightness in the wires related to the electric panel. Check not only the main electric panel but any sub-panels in your home and the meter can (the industry name for the container that holds the meter attached to your house).

If you find yourself tripping the circuit breaker more than two times in a row, it's also time to call the electrician.

There is probably a "dead short" somewhere in the system. Continuous tripping will melt the wires, leading to a possible fire.

FOR BUSINESS OWNERS

Commercial property owners are subject to the same problems with electrical panels in their stores, shops and warehouses. Preventive maintenance for businesses involves:

- Having your electrical system examined periodically. If a licensed electrical contractor is at your shop to make a repair, pay a bit extra for a complete examination of your electrical system.

- Asking a licensed electrician to perform a safety inspection, looking for any possible electrical hazards in your business site.

POWER WORDS

Electric arc — An electrical breakdown of a gas which produces an ongoing plasma discharge. This results from a current flowing through normally nonconductive media such as air.

Spark — An electric spark, usually with a flash and a sharp noise, that may occur when electric current through an inductive device is suddenly interrupted.

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