FREE HOMEOWNER GUIDE

Bathroom and bathtub electrical safety: what the code requires

Why bathrooms have the strictest rules

Bathrooms are the most tightly regulated room in a house for electrical work, and the space around a tub is the strictest part of that room. Water, moisture, and tight quarters make correct wiring non-negotiable. Every bathroom circuit has to meet the National Electrical Code and the Oregon Electrical Specialty Code, and we correct unsafe bathroom wiring on remodels and inspections across the Portland metro all the time.

GFCI protection and dedicated circuits

Two rules cover most bathrooms. Every bathroom outlet has to be GFCI-protected, and the receptacles need a dedicated 20-amp circuit that is not shared with the lights or the rest of the house. Older homes, especially anything built before the 1980s, often have neither, which is why remodels so often uncover wiring that needs bringing up to code.

- [ ] All bathroom receptacles must be GFCI-protected
- [ ] Bathroom receptacles need a dedicated 20-amp circuit
- [ ] Older 2-prong or unprotected outlets have to be replaced; see 2-prong vs 3-prong outlets
- [ ] At least one outlet is required near the sink

Lighting and fixtures over a tub

Fixture placement over a tub is one of the most common inspection failures. Anything over or beside a tub has to be rated for a wet or damp location, and there are clearance rules on how close a fixture or switch can be to the tub itself.

- [ ] Fixtures over a tub must be rated for wet or damp locations
- [ ] No hanging or pendant fixtures over a tub
- [ ] Recessed lights must be properly sealed and rated
- [ ] Switches must not be reachable from inside the tub

Jetted, heated, and soaking tubs

Whirlpool, jetted, heated, and air-jet tubs are electrical appliances, and they carry their own requirements. They need a dedicated circuit, proper bonding and grounding, an accessible disconnect, and GFCI-protected power. Done wrong, they are both a shock hazard and a way to burn out expensive equipment. This is closely related to how we wire a hot tub, and it is not a DIY circuit.

What is not allowed near a tub

The code flatly prohibits a few things in the tub zone, and if your bathroom still has any of them it should be corrected during a remodel. If a remodel adds heated floors, a towel warmer, or new circuits, your panel may need capacity added too.

- [ ] Standard outlets inside the tub zone
- [ ] Switches reachable from inside the tub
- [ ] Extension cords or power strips as permanent wiring
- [ ] Non-rated fixtures mounted above the tub

Frequently asked questions

Do bathroom outlets have to be GFCI-protected?

Yes. Every receptacle in a bathroom must be GFCI-protected, without exception, because of how close they are to water. Older two-prong or unprotected outlets must be replaced to meet code, and this is one of the first things an inspector checks on a bathroom remodel.

How close can an outlet be to a bathtub?

Outlets are not allowed inside the tub or shower zone itself, and any receptacle in the bathroom must be GFCI-protected. Switches also cannot be placed where someone could reach them from inside the tub. The exact clearances come from the National Electrical Code and Oregon code, and a licensed electrician sizes the placement to meet them.

Does a bathroom need its own circuit?

Yes. Code requires a dedicated 20-amp circuit for bathroom receptacles, separate from the lighting and other rooms in most cases. Many older Portland and Beaverton homes were not wired that way, so a remodel is often when that dedicated circuit gets added.

Can I put a light directly over my bathtub?

Only if the fixture is rated for a wet or damp location and it meets the clearance rules above the tub. Hanging and pendant fixtures are not allowed over a tub, and recessed lights have to be properly sealed and rated. Placement is a common inspection failure, so it is worth having an electrician confirm it.

Sources

1. Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters, Electrical Safety Foundation International (ESFI). https://www.esfi.org/program/ground-fault-circuit-interrupters/
2. Electrical Safety: Checklist, National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). https://content.nfpa.org/-/media/project/storefront/catalog/files/home-fire-safety/electrical/electrical_safety_checklist.pdf
3. Electrical Code Program: Codes and standards, Oregon Building Codes Division. https://www.oregon.gov/bcd/codes-stand/Pages/electrical.aspx

Need a licensed electrician in the Portland area?
Call Smiley Electric at (503) 484-7556 (Mon–Sat, 7am–5pm) or visit smileyelectric.net/contact. For sparks, smoke, a burning smell or a hot panel, turn off the power if it is safe and call right away.

Reviewed by Joshua Smiley, owner & master electrician, Smiley Electric. Last reviewed November 13, 2026. Online version: smileyelectric.net/help/bathroom-and-bathtub-electrical-safety/. General information, not a substitute for an on-site inspection.
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