FREE HOMEOWNER GUIDE

Why does my breaker keep tripping?

Overloaded circuit (the most common cause)

An overloaded circuit is the most frequent reason a breaker trips. It happens when too many devices run on the same circuit at once, pulling more amperage than the breaker is rated to handle, and the breaker shuts things down before the wiring overheats.

Older Portland homes, especially those built before the 1990s, were wired for far less electrical demand than modern households require. You can try unplugging some devices, moving appliances to other circuits, and resetting the breaker once. If it trips again, it is time to call a licensed electrician.

- [ ] A space heater running at the same time as a microwave
- [ ] A hair dryer and bathroom heater on the same circuit
- [ ] A garage fridge plus power tools on one outlet
- [ ] An EV charger sharing a circuit with other loads

Short circuit (more serious)

A short circuit occurs when a hot wire touches a neutral wire inside an outlet, switch, appliance, or your panel, creating a sudden surge of current that trips the breaker immediately. Unlike a simple overload, this is a wiring fault and requires a licensed electrician to diagnose and repair safely.

Short circuits can damage wiring and create a real fire risk. This is not a DIY situation. Do not keep resetting the breaker; call a licensed electrician.

- [ ] A burning smell near an outlet or panel
- [ ] A blackened or discolored outlet
- [ ] An outlet or switch plate that feels warm to the touch
- [ ] A breaker that trips instantly the moment you reset it

Failing breaker or outdated panel

Sometimes the breaker itself is the problem. Breakers are mechanical devices and wear out over time, especially in panels 20 or more years old. A breaker that trips under normal loads, will not stay reset, or feels loose is telling you it needs to be replaced.

Older panels in Portland homes, especially Federal Pacific (Stab-Lok) and Zinsco brands, are particularly prone to this. These panels have known safety defects, and if your home has one it is worth getting it evaluated.

- [ ] The breaker feels loose or wobbly in the panel

- [ ] The breaker will not stay in the reset position
- [ ] It trips randomly without any obvious load
- [ ] The panel is a Federal Pacific, Zinsco, or other recalled brand
- [ ] The panel is more than 25 to 30 years old

Is it safe to keep resetting a breaker?

The rule is simple: reset it once. If it trips again, stop. Repeatedly forcing a tripping breaker back on does not fix the problem; it bypasses your home's main safety mechanism.

A repeatedly tripping breaker is a symptom, not the problem itself. The problem is whatever is causing it to trip, and that is what needs to be fixed. Overriding it can overheat wiring inside your walls, damage appliances, and increase the risk of an electrical fire.

Frequently asked questions

Why does my breaker trip when I turn on one appliance?

That appliance may be drawing more current than the circuit can handle, or the circuit may already be close to capacity from other loads. High-draw appliances like space heaters, microwaves, hair dryers, and EV chargers often need a dedicated circuit. If the breaker trips immediately, there could also be a fault in the appliance itself.

Can a bad breaker cause tripping?

Yes. Breakers are mechanical devices that wear out over time. A breaker that trips under normal loads, or trips randomly with nothing plugged in, is likely failing and needs to be replaced. This is especially common in older panels and known problematic brands like Federal Pacific and Zinsco.

Is a tripping breaker a fire hazard?

A tripping breaker itself is a safety feature that is protecting you. The potential fire hazard is the underlying cause: a short circuit, overloaded wiring, or a faulty panel that is not tripping when it should. If ignored or repeatedly overridden, the risk increases significantly.

Do I need a permit to replace a breaker in Oregon?

Replacing a single breaker in an existing panel generally does not require a permit in Oregon. However, if the work involves upgrading your panel, adding circuits, or changing your service entrance, a permit is required. We handle all permit applications and inspection coordination when permits are needed.

Sources

1. Troubleshooting Home Power Problems, Portland General Electric. https://portlandgeneral.com/outages-safety/why-is-my-power-out/home-faqs
2. Electrical Safety (safety tip sheet), National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/project/storefront/catalog/files/safety-tip-sheets/electricalsafetytips.pdf
3. Home Electrical Fires, Electrical Safety Foundation International (ESFI). https://www.esfi.org/home-electrical-fires/

4. Residential Electrical Permits, City of Portland Permitting & Development. https://www.portland.gov/ppd/residential-permitting/residential-electrical-permits

> **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/breaker-keeps-tripping/. General information, not a substitute for an on-site inspection.
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