FREE HOMEOWNER GUIDE

Breaker won't reset? Here's what it means and what to do

The most common causes

If your breaker will not reset, it is not being stubborn. It is doing exactly what it was designed to do, actively protecting your home from a wiring fault, overloaded circuit, or failing panel component. When a breaker trips and will not reset, there is always a reason.

- ☐ Short circuit in the wiring: a hot wire touching a neutral creates a surge that trips the breaker instantly
- ☐ Ground fault: electricity strays to a surface it shouldn't, often near water in bathrooms, kitchens, garages, or outdoors
- ☐ Overloaded circuit: too many devices drawing power at once
- ☐ A damaged appliance with an internal short that trips the breaker every time it is turned on
- ☐ A failing or worn-out breaker, common in panels 20 or more years old
- ☐ An outdated panel, especially Federal Pacific (Stab-Lok) and Zinsco brands

What you can try safely before calling

Before calling an electrician, a few safe steps can rule out simpler causes. If the breaker trips again immediately after resetting, stop. Repeated attempts to force a tripping breaker back on can overheat wiring, damage appliances, and increase fire risk. At that point the problem needs professional diagnosis.

- ☐ Unplug all devices connected to the affected circuit
- ☐ Flip the breaker firmly all the way OFF first, then back ON; a half-reset won't work
- ☐ Check nearby GFCI outlets in bathrooms, kitchens, and garages and press reset on any that have tripped
- ☐ Look for any appliances that feel unusually warm or show signs of damage

Call immediately if you notice any of these

Some breaker problems are urgent. Do not wait to schedule if you notice signs of a serious wiring or panel problem, which can pose a fire or shock risk. Call a licensed electrician the same day.

- ☐ Burning smell near the panel or any outlet
- ☐ Breaker feels loose or won't click firmly into place
- ☐ Buzzing, crackling, or hissing from the panel
- ☐ Lights flickering before or when the breaker trips
- ☐ Panel cover feels warm or hot to the touch

- [ ] Scorch marks or discoloration on outlets or the panel
- [ ] Multiple breakers tripping at the same time

Frequently asked questions

How do I reset a breaker correctly?

First, unplug devices on the affected circuit. Then push the breaker firmly all the way to the OFF position; you should feel and hear a click. Then push it back to ON. A half-reset where the breaker sits in the middle won't work. If it trips again immediately, there's an underlying problem that needs to be diagnosed.

Why does my breaker trip again right after I reset it?

If the breaker trips immediately on reset, the fault is still present, most likely a short circuit, ground fault, or failing breaker. The circuit is still seeing a problem, and the breaker is correctly refusing to stay on. Stop resetting it and call a licensed electrician.

Can I replace a breaker myself in Oregon?

Homeowners can perform some electrical work on their own homes in Oregon, but working inside an electrical panel involves live bus bars that remain energized even with the main breaker off. This is genuinely dangerous work, and a mistake can cause severe injury or death. We strongly recommend having a licensed electrician handle any panel work.

Does a breaker that won't reset mean I need a new panel?

Not necessarily; it depends on the cause. If the breaker is failing but the rest of the panel is in good shape, a single breaker replacement may be all that's needed. However, if your panel is an older Federal Pacific, Zinsco, or other recalled brand, or you're seeing multiple issues across the panel, an evaluation is worth scheduling.

Sources

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

> **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-wont-reset/. General information, not a substitute for an on-site inspection.

Cite this page: Smiley Electric. “Breaker won't reset? Here's what it means and what to do.” smileyelectric.net/help/breaker-wont-reset/. Last reviewed November 13, 2026. You are welcome to quote, print or share this page with credit to Smiley Electric and a link to smileyelectric.net/help/breaker-wont-reset/.