FREE HOMEOWNER GUIDE

Double-tapped breaker: what it is and how to fix it

What a double tap is

A double-tapped breaker is two wires landed under one breaker terminal that was built to hold a single conductor. It is one of the most common write-ups on a Portland home inspection, and inspectors flag it because a terminal clamping two wires cannot hold either one tightly. A loose wire in a panel arcs, heats up, and can start a fire, which is exactly what the connection is supposed to prevent.

It is usually not an emergency, but it is a genuine defect that should be corrected. Most double taps are the leftover of a DIY addition, a new circuit for a finished basement or a garage, where someone needed another circuit and doubled up rather than adding a breaker.

Why it is a problem

A breaker screw torqued down on two wires almost always grips one well and the other poorly. The loose conductor works itself looser over time, and a loose connection under load is the classic recipe for heat and arcing inside the panel. It also defeats the breaker: if one of the two circuits faults, the shared terminal can behave unpredictably.

- ☐ Uneven clamping leaves one wire loose from day one
- ☐ A loose connection builds resistance, heat, and eventually an arc
- ☐ It can show up as a buzzing panel or a breaker that trips oddly
- ☐ Two circuits share one breaker's protection, which is not how the panel was designed

The exception people miss

Not every double tap is a violation. A handful of breakers are specifically listed to accept two conductors, and their terminal is built for it, certain Square D QO and some Eaton and Cutler-Hammer models among them. On those, two wires under one screw is allowed by the manufacturer. The catch is that most breakers are not listed for it, and telling the difference means reading the breaker's own labeling. That is a call for a licensed electrician, not a guess from a photo.

How it gets fixed

The repair is quick and inexpensive once someone is in the panel safely. Which route fits depends on the panel and the circuits involved.

- ☐ Move one of the two wires onto its own new breaker, if the panel has an open space
- ☐ Pigtail the two circuit wires to a single conductor that lands on the breaker, using an approved connector

- [ ] Swap in a breaker that is listed for two conductors, where the panel brand offers one
- [ ] If the panel is full, that is often the real signal to price a panel upgrade or a subpanel

If it turned up on an inspection

Double taps come up constantly in real estate transactions, and they are almost always a cheap fix that should not sink a deal. If you are buying, selling, or getting a home ready to list, we correct these fast and can provide documentation for the file. We do a lot of this work for agents and their clients through our electrician-for-realtors service. Do not open the panel to look yourself, the bus bars stay live even with the main off. Note it for the electrician and leave the cover on.

Frequently asked questions

Is a double-tapped breaker dangerous?

It can be. A terminal built for one wire cannot clamp two of them tightly, so one usually stays loose, and a loose connection in a panel builds heat and can arc. It is rarely an immediate emergency, but it is a real defect that should be corrected. The fix is quick and inexpensive.

Are double taps ever allowed?

Yes, on the specific breakers that are listed by the manufacturer to accept two conductors, such as certain Square D QO and some Eaton models. Their terminal is designed for it. Most breakers are not listed for two wires, and telling which is which means reading the breaker's labeling, so it is a determination for a licensed electrician.

How much does it cost to fix a double-tapped breaker?

It is one of the cheaper panel corrections, usually a matter of adding a breaker or installing a pigtail. We confirm the price before starting and can document the repair for a home sale. If the panel is full and there is no room to separate the circuits, that often points toward a panel upgrade instead.

Can I fix a double-tapped breaker myself?

We do not recommend it. The panel's bus bars stay energized even with the main breaker off, so working inside it is genuinely dangerous. This is a fast job for a licensed electrician, and having it done right, and documented, is what clears it on an inspection report.

Sources

1. Electrical Safety (safety tip sheet), National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/project/storefront/catalog/files/safety-tip-sheets/electricalsafetytips.pdf
2. Q & A: Arc Fault Circuit Interrupters, Electrical Safety Foundation International (ESFI). https://www.esfi.org/q-a-arc-fault-circuit-interrupters/

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