FREE HOMEOWNER GUIDE

Garage outlets not working? Find the one GFCI that runs them

The answer, first

In most homes every garage outlet is protected by a single GFCI, and when it trips the whole garage goes dead at once. Often it is more than the garage. In many houses built from the late 1970s through the 1990s it was common to put the garage, bathroom, and outdoor outlets on one GFCI. So the reset button for your garage may be in a bathroom, and a tripped garage GFCI may be why the outlet by the back door quit.

Find that GFCI, reset it, and then work out why it tripped. In a garage the cause is usually sitting right there, plugged in.

Where the garage GFCI hides

You are looking for one outlet with Test and Reset buttons, or one breaker with a Test button. When you find it, press Reset until it clicks. If it will not click in, check the panel for a tripped breaker first, because a GFCI cannot reset without power coming to it.

The garage lights and the door opener are often on the same circuit as the outlets. If the opener is dead too, pull the red release cord with the door closed and lift the door by hand. These are the usual hiding places for the GFCI.

- [ ] Behind shelving, storage bins, a workbench, or the freezer
- [ ] On the wall next to the electrical panel
- [ ] Near the door into the house, the water heater, or the laundry
- [ ] In a bathroom, often the one closest to the garage
- [ ] On an outside wall outlet, under its cover
- [ ] In the panel, as a breaker with a Test button

What trips a garage circuit

Freezers and second refrigerators are the classic cause. An aging compressor or defrost heater leaks a little current to ground, the GFCI sees it, and it shuts off. The bigger problem is that nobody notices until the food has thawed. The right fix is not to remove the GFCI protection. It is a dedicated circuit for the freezer with its own new GFCI, and repairing or replacing the appliance if it is the one leaking. A simple freezer temperature alarm is cheap insurance in the meantime.

Tools are the next cause. Many garages have one 15-amp circuit for every outlet, the lights, and the opener. An air compressor, a table saw, or a shop vacuum pulls heavy current at startup and trips the breaker instead of

the GFCI. A space heater does the same thing more slowly.

Car charging is a newer one. Charging an EV from a regular outlet typically pulls a steady 12 amps for hours, which is most of what a 15-amp circuit can carry, and it finds every worn outlet and weak connection on that circuit. A plug or outlet that gets warm while the car charges means stop. Our Level 1 vs Level 2 charging guide and EV charger installation page cover the better options.

Then there is the damp. Through a Portland winter, wet cars drip on the floor, the slab sweats, and outlets on exterior walls or near the big door pick up moisture. A damp outlet box will trip a GFCI until it dries out.

Detached garages and shops

A detached garage gets its power through one feeder or one circuit from the house, usually underground. If everything out there is dead, check the house panel for a tripped breaker labeled garage or shop, then look for a small subpanel or a GFCI in the garage itself.

Older detached garages in Portland were often fed by a single buried cable that is now decades old. When that cable starts to fail, the breaker may trip only when the ground is wet, or the power may come and go. That needs a proper diagnosis, and often a new feeder and subpanel. Our guide to subpanels for garages, ADUs, and shops explains what that involves.

When to stop and call

Reset once. Call us if any of these apply.

- [ ] The GFCI or breaker trips again as soon as you reset it
- [ ] The GFCI will not reset with everything unplugged
- [ ] An outlet or plug is warm, melted, or discolored
- [ ] A detached garage loses power in wet weather
- [ ] You run a freezer, tools, and a charger off one circuit and reset it every week
- [ ] You cannot find any GFCI, and nothing in the panel is tripped

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What an electrician does to find and fix it

We find which device protects the garage and everything else that is downstream of it. The GFCI is tested and replaced if it has worn out. We check the freezer or refrigerator for leakage, so you know whether the appliance or the wiring is at fault.

When the real problem is one circuit doing five jobs, the fix is more circuits: dedicated 20-amp circuits for the freezer and the workbench, or a subpanel if the garage is turning into a shop or getting a car charger. You get the price before the work starts. It begins as an electrical repair visit.

Frequently asked questions

Why are my garage outlets dead when the breaker isn't tripped?

Almost always a tripped GFCI. Garage outlets are protected by a GFCI that can be hidden behind stored items, next to the panel, or in another room entirely. Reset every GFCI in the garage, the bathrooms, and on outdoor outlets. If none of them brings the power back, the fault is in the wiring and needs an electrician.

Why did my garage and bathroom outlets go out together?

They are probably on the same GFCI. In many homes built from the late 1970s through the 1990s, one GFCI protects the garage, bathroom, and outdoor outlets. When it trips, all of them go dead. Look for the one outlet with Test and Reset buttons, in the garage or in a bathroom, and reset it.

Should a garage freezer be on a GFCI outlet?

Current code calls for GFCI protection on garage outlets, including the one a freezer uses, because garages are damp and have concrete floors. The way to protect the food is a dedicated circuit for the freezer with its own GFCI, so nothing else can trip it, plus a temperature alarm. If the freezer trips a new GFCI by itself, the freezer needs repair.

Can I charge my EV from a regular garage outlet?

You can if the circuit and the outlet are in good condition and nothing else heavy shares the circuit. Level 1 charging is a steady load for many hours, which is harder on wiring than almost anything else in a garage. If the plug or outlet gets warm, or the breaker trips, stop and have the circuit checked.

Why does my garage GFCI trip when it rains?

Moisture is reaching something on that circuit. It is often an outdoor outlet that shares the garage GFCI, or a garage outlet on an exterior wall. The GFCI will keep tripping until it dries. If it happens in every storm, the wet outlet or its cover needs to be found and repaired.

Sources

1. GFCI Fact Sheet (Publication 099), U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/099_0.pdf
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. Why is My Power Out?, Portland General Electric. https://portlandgeneral.com/outages-safety/why-is-my-power-out

> **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/garage-outlets-not-working/. General information, not a substitute for an on-site inspection.

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