FREE HOMEOWNER GUIDE

Light switch not working? How to tell what failed

The answer, first

When a light switch stops working, the switch is only one of four suspects: the bulb or fixture, the power feeding the circuit, the switch itself, or a connection between them. Rule out the bulb and the breaker first, since both take a minute. If the light still will not come on, the usual finding is a worn-out switch or a loose wire on it.

A switch is a mechanical part. Every flip moves a small spring-loaded contact, and after years of daily use the contact wears, the spring weakens, and the switch stops making a solid connection. The switches that get used the most, in the kitchen, hallway, and bathroom, are the ones that fail first.

Check these before blaming the switch

Work down this list in order. Each step rules out one suspect without opening anything.

- ☐ Put in a bulb you know works. If a fixture with several bulbs is completely dark, it is not the bulbs
- ☐ See what else is dead. If nearby outlets or other lights are out too, the circuit lost power, not the switch
- ☐ At the panel, find any breaker that is tripped or sitting in the middle, push it fully OFF, then ON
- ☐ Press Reset on your GFCI outlets. Bathroom and exterior lights are sometimes fed through one
- ☐ If two switches control the light, try each one in both positions
- ☐ If the switch runs an outlet instead of a ceiling light, plug a lamp into both halves of each outlet in the room

Signs the switch itself has failed

A worn switch usually gives some notice before it quits completely. The first four signs below point to a worn part.

The last one is different. A switch that crackles, buzzes, or feels warm is arcing or overheating, and that is a hazard, not an inconvenience. Leave it off, turn off the breaker, and read our pages on a warm outlet or switch and an outlet or switch that buzzes or crackles.

- ☐ The toggle feels loose or mushy and no longer snaps
- ☐ The light comes on only if you hold or wiggle the switch
- ☐ The light flickers when you touch the switch
- ☐ It works some days and not others
- ☐ The switch crackles, buzzes, or feels warm

Dimmers, three-way switches, and smart switches

Dimmers have electronics inside, so they fail in more ways: the light is stuck on, stuck off, works only at full brightness, or flickers at low settings. Every dimmer has a maximum load, and its rating for LED bulbs is much lower than its rating for old incandescent bulbs. The bulbs also have to be marked dimmable. A dimmer that is slightly warm is normal. One that is hot is overloaded or failing.

A light controlled from two places uses a pair of three-way switches. When one of them fails, the light works only when the other switch is in a certain position. The same symptom shows up right after someone replaces one of the pair and lands the wires on the wrong terminals, because the wire colors in a three-way setup are not consistent from house to house.

Most smart switches need a neutral wire in the switch box, and the switch boxes in many older Portland homes do not have one. A smart switch that drops offline, or LED lights that glow or flicker when it is off, often traces back to that.

Switches in older Portland homes

In a mid-century house the original switches are simply at the end of their life, and replacing them is ordinary maintenance. Homes old enough to have knob-and-tube wiring are a different matter. The insulation on those wires is often brittle inside the switch box, and it breaks when it is disturbed, so that is not a box to open casually. See our knob and tube rewiring page if that describes your house.

Many older bedrooms and living rooms were built without a ceiling light. Instead, the wall switch controls one half of an outlet for a lamp. If that outlet was replaced at some point and wired as an ordinary outlet, the switch by the door now appears to do nothing at all.

When to stop and call

A dead switch with no other symptoms can wait for a scheduled visit. These cannot. Turn the switch off, turn off the breaker if you can identify it, and call us.

- [ ] The switch is warm or hot, and it is not a dimmer
- [ ] It crackles, buzzes, or sizzles
- [ ] You see scorch marks or melted plastic, or smell burning
- [ ] The breaker trips when you flip the switch
- [ ] Several switches or lights quit at the same time

What an electrician does to find and fix it

We test whether power is reaching the switch and whether it is leaving it. That tells us within minutes whether the fault is in the feed, the switch, or the fixture, which is the core of electrical troubleshooting. A bad switch is replaced with the right type and rating: single-pole, three-way, four-way, or a dimmer matched to the LED load it controls, with the wires fastened under the screws.

If the switch tests good, we follow the circuit to the fixture or the connection in between and repair that, instead of swapping parts and hoping. It is everyday electrical repair work, and most of it is finished in one

visit.

Frequently asked questions

Why did my light switch suddenly stop working?

The most common causes are a burned-out bulb or failed LED fixture, a tripped breaker or GFCI, or a switch that has worn out. Try a known good bulb, check the panel for a breaker sitting in the middle position, and reset your GFCI outlets. If the light is still dead, the switch or a wire connection on it has most likely failed.

How do I know if it is the switch or the light fixture?

Start with the bulb. If a new bulb does not help and other lights and outlets on the circuit still work, it is either the switch or the fixture. A switch that feels loose, no longer snaps, or works only when wiggled points to the switch. A fixture with a built-in LED and no replaceable bulb can fail on its own. An electrician settles it by testing for power at the switch.

Why does my light only work when the other switch is in a certain position?

That is the classic sign of a failed or miswired three-way switch. A light controlled from two locations uses a pair of three-way switches, and if one fails or is reconnected to the wrong terminals during a replacement, the light works only in some combinations. The fix is to test both switches and correct the wiring or replace the bad one.

Is a light switch that stopped working dangerous?

A switch that just quit, with no other symptoms, is usually a worn part and not an emergency. It becomes a safety problem if the switch is warm, crackles or buzzes, smells burnt, shows scorch marks, or trips the breaker. In those cases leave it off, turn off the breaker, and have a licensed electrician look at it.

How much does it cost to fix a light switch?

Repair calls are booked as a $295 Electrical Service Appointment. It includes the service visit and up to the first hour of labor for troubleshooting and minor repairs, so a failed switch is often replaced in that same visit. Materials are additional, and anything bigger gets an upfront price before we proceed.

Sources

1. Home Electrical Safety Checklist (Publication 513), U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/513.pdf
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/light-switch-not-working/. General information, not a substitute for an on-site inspection.
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