FREE HOMEOWNER GUIDE

# Outlet not working? Here's what it could mean

## Common reasons an outlet stops working

If you plug something in and nothing happens, the issue may be more than a simple inconvenience. A dead outlet can signal a tripped breaker, loose wiring, a failed receptacle, or a deeper electrical issue.

When a single outlet goes dead, the cause is often simpler than you would think. The most common culprit is a tripped GFCI outlet, the kind with Test and Reset buttons, usually in kitchens, bathrooms, garages, and outdoors. One GFCI can control several ordinary outlets downstream, so a trip in the bathroom can kill an outlet in the garage. We have separate walk-throughs for kitchen outlets, garage outlets, and outdoor outlets, because each one fails for its own reasons.

- [ ] A tripped circuit breaker
- [ ] A tripped GFCI outlet
- [ ] Loose wiring connections
- [ ] A worn or failed receptacle
- [ ] An overloaded circuit
- [ ] Damaged wiring inside the wall

## What you can check first

Press Reset on every GFCI in the home and see if power returns. If resetting GFCIs does not help, check your breaker panel for a tripped breaker and reset it fully, off and then on.

If the outlet is still dead, or a breaker trips again immediately, stop there. Repeated trips and dead circuits often point to a loose connection or a fault in the wiring that needs a professional.

- [ ] Check your electrical panel for a tripped breaker
- [ ] Press the reset button on nearby GFCI outlets
- [ ] Test the outlet with another device

## When to call an electrician

Electrical problems can worsen if ignored, and safe diagnosis is always the best first step. We diagnose dead outlets quickly, whether it is a failed GFCI, a loose connection, or a wiring fault, and repair it safely, then verify the rest of the circuit is sound.

- [ ] The outlet feels warm or smells burnt
- [ ] You see sparks when plugging something in
- [ ] Multiple outlets have stopped working

- [ ] The breaker won't stay reset
- [ ] You live in an older home with outdated wiring

## Frequently asked questions

### What's the most common reason a single outlet stops working?

A tripped GFCI outlet is the most common culprit. One GFCI can control several ordinary outlets downstream, so a trip in a bathroom can kill an outlet in the garage. Press Reset on every GFCI in the home to see if power returns.

### What should I check before calling an electrician?

Reset nearby GFCI outlets, check your breaker panel for a tripped breaker and reset it fully off then on, and test the outlet with another device. If the outlet is still dead or the breaker trips again, it's time to call a professional.

### When does a dead outlet need a professional?

If resetting GFCIs and breakers does not restore power, or a breaker trips again immediately, the circuit may have a loose connection or a wiring fault. Repeated trips, warm outlets, or a burning smell mean you should call a licensed electrician.

## Sources


1. Why is My Power Out?, Portland General Electric. https://portlandgeneral.com/outages-safety/why-is-my-power-out
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


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


Cite this page: Smiley Electric. “Outlet not working? Here's what it could mean.” smileyelectric.net/help/outlet-not-working/. 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/outlet-not-working/.