Getting Your Home's Electrical System Ready for Spokane Winter Storms

Winter storms in Spokane can bring heavy snow, freezing rain, and gusty winds that put real strain on a home's electrical system. Power outages, voltage fluctuations, and even damage to wiring or appliances are common when the weather turns harsh. Taking a few practical steps before the worst of the season arrives can make a big difference in keeping your home safe and comfortable. The work described here is about inspection, preparation, and knowing when to call a professional. If any part of the process feels beyond your comfort level, it's smart to hire an electrician who knows the local codes and conditions.

Start with a Walkthrough of Your Home's Electrical System

Begin by looking at the main components you can see without opening panels or removing covers. The service panel, sometimes called the breaker box, should have a clear label for each circuit. If the labels are faded or missing, take time to map out which breaker controls which room or appliance. This simple step helps during an outage or if you need to shut off power quickly. Check that the panel cover is secure and that no moisture has collected inside. Any sign of rust, corrosion, or water staining near the panel is a red flag and should be inspected by an electrician. Also look at the outdoor meter base and the mast where overhead power lines enter the house. If the mast is loose, or if you see cracked seals around the meter, those are weak points that can let in snow and ice.

Next, examine visible wiring in the basement, attic, and around the main panel. Look for frayed insulation, chew marks from rodents, or any wire that feels warm to the touch. These are signs of trouble that need professional attention. While you're at it, check that all junction boxes have covers in place and that no wires are exposed. A thorough walkthrough gives you a clear picture of your system's condition and helps you decide what needs immediate repair versus what can wait. This kind of routine check is a core part of electrical safety for homeowners in cold climates.

Protect Against Power Surges and Voltage Dips

Winter storms often cause the grid to fluctuate. When power comes back after an outage, the surge can damage sensitive electronics and appliances. A whole-home surge protector installed at the main panel is the most effective defense. It handles large surges from outside, while plug-in surge protectors guard individual devices like computers and TVs. For the best protection, both layers work together. If you don't have a whole-home unit, consider having one installed. An electrician can size it correctly for your panel and ensure it meets local codes.

Surge protectors wear out over time, especially after taking a big hit. Replace plug-in units every few years, or sooner if they show signs of damage. Also be aware that some large appliances like refrigerators and well pumps can cause small voltage dips when they start up. If you notice lights flickering or motors running slower than usual, that may indicate a wiring issue or an overloaded circuit. An electrician can diagnose the problem and suggest a fix.

Check Outdoor Outlets and Fixtures

Outdoor receptacles, light fixtures, and junction boxes take a beating during winter. Snow and ice can work their way into cracks and cause short circuits. Walk around your home and test every outdoor outlet with a plug-in device. If the outlet feels loose or the cover is broken, replace it with a weatherproof model. Also check that all outdoor light fixtures are sealed and that bulbs are rated for wet locations. For outlets near the ground, make sure they are at least 12 inches above grade and have a weatherproof cover that closes fully. If you find any exposed wiring or a fixture that has pulled away from the wall, that needs repair before the next storm. Water and electricity don't mix, and a small leak can become a bigger problem when temperatures drop below freezing.

Prepare for Power Outages

Even a well-maintained system can lose power when ice brings down a line. The key is to have a plan that doesn't rely on temporary fixes that create new hazards. If you own a portable generator, never run it indoors or in a garage, even with the door open. The exhaust contains carbon monoxide, which is deadly in enclosed spaces. Place the generator at least 20 feet from the house, with the exhaust pointing away from windows and doors. Use heavy-duty extension cords rated for outdoor use to connect appliances directly to the generator. Avoid backfeeding power through a wall outlet or the main panel unless you have a transfer switch installed by a licensed electrician. Backfeeding can electrocute a utility worker or damage your equipment. If you rely on a generator often, a dedicated transfer switch is a worthwhile investment. For homes with a sump pump, well pump, or medical equipment, a battery backup or a small inverter can keep critical devices running for a short time. Test your backup system once a month to make sure it's ready.

Another useful step is to know where your main shutoff is and how to operate it. In an emergency, being able to kill the power quickly can prevent a fire or limit damage. Practice the motion with the main breaker so it's not a struggle when you're in a hurry. Keep a flashlight near the panel, not a candle or a kerosene lamp, which are fire hazards.

Inspect Heating Equipment

Space heaters, baseboard heaters, and electric furnaces draw a lot of current and are often the cause of winter electrical fires. If you use portable space heaters, plug them directly into a wall outlet, never into an extension cord or power strip. The cord can overheat and start a fire. Check the heater's cord for cracks or fraying, and make sure the unit has a tip-over switch that shuts it off automatically. Keep the heater at least three feet from curtains, bedding, and furniture. For built-in electric heating, such as a furnace or heat pump, have it serviced before the heating season. A technician can clean coils, check connections, and verify that the unit is drawing the correct amperage. If the air handler is in an attic or crawl space, make sure the area is free of debris and that insulation isn't covering the unit. Restricted airflow can cause the system to overheat and trip a breaker. Any breaker that trips repeatedly should be investigated by an electrician, not just reset. A tripping breaker is a sign of a problem, not a normal operating condition.

Plan for Snow and Ice on the Roof

Heavy snow and ice dams can damage roof-mounted equipment like satellite dishes, antennas, and solar panels. If you have any of these, check that they are securely fastened and that the wiring entering the house is in good condition. Ice can pull wires loose or crack conduit. For homes with a metal roof or metal siding, a lightning protection system may be worth considering, though it's a separate topic from the general electrical system. The main point here is to keep roof penetrations sealed and to clear snow away from vents and exhausts for gas appliances. If you have heat tape on the roof or in gutters, inspect it for damage before the first freeze. Heat tape that is cracked or has exposed wires can cause a fire. Replace it with a newer, self-regulating type that uses less power and is less prone to overheating.

All of these checks are part of a broader approach to *electrical safety for homeowners* in a region like Spokane where winter weather is severe. You don't need to be an electrician to do the visual inspections, but any repair or upgrade should be left to a qualified professional. When you hire an electrician, choose one who is licensed, insured, and familiar with Washington codes. They can handle surge protection installation, panel upgrades, generator transfer switches, and any wiring repairs that come up. A little preparation now can save you from a cold, dark emergency later.