Keep Your Tools in Working Order

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Properly maintained tools can keep you alive, but mistreated tools can cause serious injuries and even death. The stakes are obviously high for electricians when it comes to handling their tools, says Paul “The Electrical Guru” Abernathy, a busy educator who offers training to electricians.

“Every day, at least one person is killed by electricity,” Abernathy says. “You can put your life in danger every time you touch a tool.”

Maintained for Safety
Abernathy uses tools with insulated grips. Mistreatment and wear can knock loose the insulation, drastically reducing the tool’s effectiveness.

The same goes for a voltmeter that is tossed in a truck bed, and thus absorbs every pothole or bump in the road. Its next reading could be inaccurate. “When you don’t take care of your tools, you just don’t know how reliable they will be,” Abernathy says.

A lot of tool upkeep is just common sense, says Mike Dunn, a spokesman for Bosch Power Tools. “Don’t yank on the cord,” he says. “Keep tools clean. Wipe mud off.”

The leading cause of premature power tool failure is heat, says Dunn, adding that overheating can be triggered by dirt clogging the vents. Keep tools working by cleaning vents.

Cleanliness is not only for power tools, but it is also for the grips and rubber handles. The same is true for gloves. Make sure there are no holes and that they are washed.

Using tools improperly or for a task other than their intended purposes can also contribute to premature failure, Dunn says. High-speed drills, for instance, are not designed to make large diameter holes in sheetrock, but they often are put to use for such tasks, and failure can result. “Match the right job with the right tool and the work gets done more safely,” he says.

Proper storage also is neglected frequently when using ladders, Abernathy says. But when a ladder

fails, serious injury can result—injury that just might have been prevented if the ladder had been cared for in the first place.

Abernathy urges special care for diagnostic equipment because its accuracy can be a serious matter. Most meters and gauges come with protective cases. And the way to keep them working is to store them in there. When they are exposed to dirt, water, mud, they begin to malfunction. Store them properly and years of good service result.

Let the Tools Work

You've got to be able to trust your tools. "Lean into a tool too hard and that can damage it," Dunn says. Don't try to force a tool to do a job. They are built to do a specific job for you, so let them.

If your tools have worn down, they must be replaced or repaired. A worn out tool can be dangerous. A screwdriver that has become dull could slip, for example, and that can put an electrician in peril. Also, you shouldn't opt for cheaper versions of the same tool when it comes to trying to prolong tool life. Go for the most sturdy and well-built products.

Stay Vigilant

"The biggest hazard for any electrician is complacency," Abernathy says. Just assuming the ladder will work—or that a meter is functioning properly—can turn into a disaster. With electricity, taking nothing for granted is the way to stay safe.

Draft your personal safety protocol, the checklist of steps you will take every day on every job, to ensure safe working conditions. Never forget that safety is your responsibility, not the general contractor's nor the builder's.

Almost no time is needed to give you the tool safety you want. "It takes maybe two or three minutes a day to add to the longevity of a tool," Dunn says. "People know what they should be doing—but obviously not everyone does it."