KNOBS, TUBES AND THOSE WIRES

It can all begin with something as simple as an on-again, off-again light bulb in the dining room fixture. The usual folk remedies - wiggling the offensive bulb, changing to a fresh bulb, trying a different style, another wattage, even giving it the evil eye - don't work.

Finally, the constant fluctuations in candle power are too much, and more drastic action is required.

If you're lucky, the fixtures in your old house are original to the era. For us, most of the fixtures are the arts and crafts style installed in the house when it was built in 1912. It was a surprise when what looked like a heavy brass fixture was actually very light and thin metal. As it came down, piece by piece, it became apparent that some of the wires were original too, though they were not, in fact, the source of the problem.

Rather, some new wiring (that clear or gold plastic-coated wire so often used in light fixtures where the wires are visible) had been fixed to the sockets and on up the chains to the ceiling flashing. When the sockets were reattached (a screw-type operation), these wires were stripped and weakened, causing a short in the one socket and threatening similar action in the others.

It was a simple task to attach new wiring in the fixture. And while at it, the sockets and the cardboard-like sleeves (which showed signs of past problems with scorching and disintegration) were replaced. A quick check of other light fixtures found no similar problems.

Unless an older home has been completely re-wired, there are often different generations of wiring. For example, we have original knob-and-tube wiring with porcelain knobs securing the wires to joists, and tubes to run the wires through. We also have some replacement wiring put in during the 1950s, and some recently installed wiring.

Although an initial inspection showed the wiring to be sound, it's still not a bad idea to have a thorough inspection done by a qualified electrician.

Still, there are several things you can correct without an electrician.

In light fixtures with separate sockets, such as chandeliers and wall sconces, look for scorching around the socket area. This could be a sign of a short in the wiring from wear and tear, or stress on the wiring. In the case of both ceiling and wall fixtures, make sure there is adequate support for the fixture. Wall sconces should be secured to the electrical box itself or to bracings.

Wall sockets or plug-ins should also be checked for proper wiring and grounding. Consider replacing these with three-pronged sockets.

Old light switches, such as push buttons, should be inspected. We have toggle switches in our bathroom, and have been advised that an electrician should do any maintenance or replacement on these.

If you have fuses in your fuse box, make sure they are the right size for the circuit. Never put in a heavier fuse than the circuit is designed for. You might also want to have an electrician look into the amount of service entering your house. In our case, we have only 60 amp service and will likely upgrade.

Other things to look for are iron-clad wiring beside appliances such as furnaces, or add-ons that just don't make the grade. In one instance, we found an ordinary extension cord used to wire an outside light from an inside fixture! The cord had been painted the same color as the ceiling to hide it.

Don't hesitate to call in a qualified electrician or electrical inspector to look at your wiring.

The benefits far outweigh the cost. And one of those benefits may merely be the convenience of the modern electric era - of being able to turn on the iron or kettle while someone else in the house is using the hair dryer.

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