

Better to Unplug

Pulling the plug on some home appliances can save energy and reduce your risk of an unexpected home emergency.

When does it make sense to unplug? According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), home appliances can pose a risk to health and safety if they are not used properly. You may not give the coffee maker a second thought once you're through the door, but Consumer Reports, in a February 2008 issue, suggests that may be a risky practice. Recalls of toasters and toaster ovens during the last decade have become a regular occurrence. In fact, almost half a million Hamilton Beach and Proctor-Silex toasters were recalled last year because of their propensity to continue heating even after the toast has been removed.



Coffee makers have had a similar history. In fact, last year, the Signature Gourmet and Kitchen Gourmet coffee makers, sold at popular pharmacy chain store, were recalled because of their potential for creating a fire hazard. While no injuries were reported, the CPSC reported 23 fires caused by the coffee makers.

The whole point of crock pot cooking is the crock's ability to stew while you're away. But is this a safe practice? Opinions vary, but most people believe them to be safe, as long as the units are in good working order, with no frayed cords. To insure their operational safety, some users suggest placing a crock pot atop a large cooling rack while it is cooking, to keep it separated from the counter top.

Space heaters are one of the leading sources of home fires every year, according to the CPSC, causing an estimated 21,000 fires per year. To prevent property loss and serious injury, heaters should be used properly, including turning heaters off when a room is unoccupied, and always unplugging a heater when no one is at home.

It's nice to think your appliances are working while you are away, but one appliance that should be resting while you're away is the clothes dryer. Dryer lint filters need to be cleaned regularly, and there are now small vacuum hoses that can snake inside the filter pocket to remove hard-to-reach lint. An unattended dryer with a full lint screen can spell real trouble. According to the CPSC, about 15,500 fires are associated with clothes dryer fires each year. As a result, dryers should never be left running when a home is unoccupied. They should also not be used to dry plastic, rubber or foam, which retain heat and are quite combustible. Consumer Reports suggests people use common sense when considering what appliances should be unplugged. A clock radio is probably less dangerous to leave plugged in than a curling iron. As a general rule, it makes sense to unplug any heating appliance after their use.



As an added bonus, you'll save energy and kilowatt hours by unplugging those appliances as well. Many electronic devices in use in our homes draw electricity all the time, whether they are being used or not. This happens with appliances including most coffee makers and microwaves, to name a few. This energy use is known as standby power or vampire power (so named because the appliances suck power even in the middle of the night). To defeat vampire power, unplugging the appliance or turning off a smart power strip can eliminate the extra electrical load.



How does a smart power strip work? Because it may not be practical to constantly plug and unplug every appliance after each use, several companies have developed smart power strips that do the job for you. They monitor electricity use in each plug and shut off the ones that have been idle for a certain period of time. Until you purchase a smart strip, unplugging appliances will provide the same benefit. Unplugging the devices that have the highest standby power – such as TVs and computers -- will help. Unplugging and powering down could help save some of the over four billion dollars spent on standby power in the United States every year.