

How Can I Tell if An Extension Cord is Safe to Use Outdoors?

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by dkelectrical

From maintenance tasks to recreational activities, there are many uses for electricity outdoors throughout the year, from using power tools for projects to routing power for patio appliances to decorating your property for the holidays. You'll need a safe extension cord, designed for outdoor use, to prevent a potentially devastating fire, or serious injury, or death from electrical shock. But, how can you tell if the extension cord you have in mind for the job is safe for outdoor use?

Which Kind of Extension Cord Is Safe to Use Outdoors?

There are several types of ratings for extension cords. One rating is for their type of intended use: heavy, medium, or light duty. Another rating is by amperage: the power load they are designed to carry safely. Yet another rating is for indoor or outdoor usage. The "W" symbol is used to label cords made for outdoor use. There are yet other ratings used by some manufacturers to indicate the intended frequency of use for which the cord was designed.

Check the packaging, or look on the cord, to be sure the extension cord you've selected is appropriate for outdoor electricity use. Or, use this quick checklist to confirm that the cord is designed for outdoor use:

- *Rating Indicator* — Look for the letter "W" on the cord or on the packaging. That's the letter used to identify cords that are designed for outside electricity use.

- *Insulation* — Extension cords rated for outdoor use have additional insulation around the wires in the cord. This makes outdoor cords thicker than standard power cords made for general indoor use only, though there are some thick indoor cords designed for some purposes.
- *Color* — Many cords sold for outside maintenance or other utility purposes have bright yellow, orange, blue, green. Others are black or brown, to blend in aesthetically in outdoor living spaces where cords may be more permanently placed for electricity on patios or decks.
- *Coverings* — The covers of outdoor extension cords are typically made of heavy-duty rubber, plastic, or vinyl. Their sturdy construction protects outdoor cords from moisture, sunlight, temperature changes, and other elements that cause rapid deterioration of less durable indoor cords.
- *Plugs* — Outdoor extension cords always have three-prong plugs, whereas indoor cords may have either two or three prongs, depending on particular needs. The third prong is connected to the cord's grounding wire, to reduce risk of electrical shock or fire.
- *Amperage* — Extension cords made for outdoor use have high amp ratings, because they are designed to deliver the higher amounts of power often required by outdoor electrical devices.

How to Protect Extension Cords from Weather Conditions

All outlets mounted on the exterior of your home should have a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) built into the outdoor outlet. A GFCI is a circuit breaker that shuts off electricity to the cord, if it detects irregular electricity flow, such as when it is passing through water, or a human, or something else other than a normal power conduit.

The GFCI is especially important in rain or melting snow or ice, in which weather events create a lot of water around the connection of the outside outlet where the extension cord is plugged in. The GFCI-protected outlet helps safeguard users from electric shock when using the outlet.

If the outlets do not have GFCIs, you can use a GFCI adapter, which you can buy and place on the end of the extension cord. When using the cord, it should be plugged into the GFCI adapter, and the adapter should then be plugged directly into the electrical outlet.

Tips for Safe Use of Outside Extension Cords

In addition to making sure you have the right type of extension cord for outdoor use and a GFCI, here are some other important ways to help keep people and pets safe while using outdoor extension cords around your home:

- *Inspect Cords Before Each Use* — Before using an extension cord that has been stored, inspect all sides along the full length of the cord for cracks in the covering and exposed wire. Also check to ensure that the plugs on both ends of the cord are attached securely, not loose or allowing exposed wires above the plug.

- *Protect Extension Cords* — Keep cords away from exposure to spots where there is rainwater, or melting snow or ice.
- *Do not Overload Cords* — Do not attempt to run too many electrical devices or appliances at the same time on one extension cord.
- *Choose Highly Visible Cords* — While powering construction tools, maintenance equipment, etc., use cords with bright coloring, to help avoid creating a trip hazard.
- *Storage of Extension Cords* — Unplug the extension cord after use, coil it properly, and store it in a space that is protected from extreme temperatures and wet conditions.



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