



An Extended Guide · No. 1364

Warning Signs and Common Problems With an ATS

What to watch for,
and when to call

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! Read this first — this is licensed electrician's work

An automatic transfer switch is wired straight into your home's main electrical panel and works hand in hand with a standby generator. That makes installing one a licensed electrician's job from start to finish — almost always with a permit and an inspection — and never a do-it-yourself project. A big part of what the switch does is keep your generator's power from ever backfeeding onto the utility lines, which protects the crews working to bring your power back. Getting that right is exactly why the work belongs to a licensed pro. My job is to help you understand it, choose it, and live with it — not to open your panel. So this guide is about spotting trouble early and calling the right pro — never about opening things up yourself.

Catching trouble early, calmly

The best time to discover your backup system needs attention is on a calm day, not during a storm. This guide helps you recognize the warning signs — the lights, sounds, and small changes that mean 'have this looked at' — so a little problem never becomes a big one at the worst moment.

I'm Bill, and I help folks in Portage County keep an eye on their home tech without becoming experts. Your system is good at flagging trouble if you know what to watch for — and catching it early usually means a calm, scheduled fix instead of an emergency. That's the whole aim of this guide.

Everything here is about noticing and reporting, never about repairing. Spotting a warning sign is your job; fixing it is a licensed pro's. Done that way, you get the best of both — an early catch and a safe repair.

★ Not sure if something's a problem?

If your system does something new and you're unsure whether it matters, that's exactly what I'm here for. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and describe it — I'll help you tell a quirk from a concern.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these signs, you'll catch most trouble early.

- ❑ A warning light or message is the clearest sign — don't ignore it.
- ❑ A rough, struggling, or failed self-test means call before the next outage.
- ❑ Hard or slow starting usually points to the battery.
- ❑ New noises, smells, leaks, or corrosion are all worth a look.
- ❑ A gas smell is urgent — leave and call the gas company, don't troubleshoot.
- ❑ You spot the signs; a licensed pro does the fixing — never open the switch or panel.

✓ Early and calm beats late and frantic

Almost every warning sign, caught early, becomes a scheduled service call instead of a storm-night emergency. Noticing is the whole trick.

Why keeping an eye out pays off

A backup system mostly waits quietly — which is exactly why a little attention matters so much.

Because your system spends most of its life idle, a developing problem can go unnoticed until the moment you need it — the worst possible time to discover it. But these systems usually give warning: a light, a rough self-test, a new sound. If you know the signs, you catch trouble on a calm day and fix it on your schedule, not the storm's.

This isn't about worrying or hovering. It's about a light awareness — noticing when something's different — that turns your system from a silent gamble into a dependable safeguard. A few minutes of attention over the years prevents most unpleasant surprises.

✓ The system usually warns you first

Modern backup systems are good at flagging trouble early. Your part is simply to notice and heed those warnings — then the system's own helpfulness does the rest.

The warning light or message

The clearest sign of all is the one your system is designed to give: an alert.

Most systems have status lights on the generator's control, or send a message through an app if you have monitoring. A steady 'ready' indicator means all is well; a warning light, a red indicator, or an 'attention needed' message means the system has noticed something and wants a look. This is your system doing you a favor — telling you plainly that it's time to call.

Don't ignore or 'get used to' a warning light. It rarely goes away on its own, and it's the system's way of catching a problem before it becomes a failure. Note what it says and call your installer — our monitoring guide covers reading these alerts.

! Never live with a warning light

A warning light you've learned to ignore is a failure waiting for a storm. Treat any warning indicator as a prompt to call — promptly, but calmly.

A rough or failed self-test

Your weekly exercise cycle is a wonderful early-warning system — if you listen to it.

Normally, a self-test is a prompt start, a smooth few-minute run, and a clean shutdown.

Warning signs are a test that won't start, cranks a long time, runs rough or surges, stops early, or simply doesn't happen when it should. Any of these is your generator telling you, on a calm day, that it needs attention before it's called on for real.

This is exactly why the exercise cycle exists — to surface problems when it's convenient, not during an outage. So pay a little attention to how your tests sound, and treat a rough one as the gift it is: an early warning. Our testing-and-exercise guide covers what a healthy test looks like.

✓ Listen to your self-tests

After a few weeks you'll know your generator's normal test sound. When one sounds off, trust that instinct and call — the self-test just did its most important job.

Hard or slow starting — think battery

If your generator is slow or reluctant to start, the usual culprit has a name: the battery.

A weak or aging start battery is one of the most common problems in standby systems, and it often shows up first as slow, labored cranking during a self-test, or a start that takes several tries. Cold weather makes it worse. Because a dead battery is a leading cause of a no-start when you need it, hard starting is a sign worth acting on quickly.

You can't (and shouldn't) service the battery yourself, but you can notice the sign and report it. A pro checks and replaces the battery as part of service — and catching a tired one early, from its hard starting, means replacing it on your schedule rather than after a failure. Our maintenance guide covers battery care.

✓ Slow cranking is the battery waving a flag

When a generator starts slowly or reluctantly, it's usually the battery asking to be checked. Heed it early, and you'll replace a tired battery before it becomes a dead one.

New or unusual noises

Your generator has a normal voice. When it changes, that's worth noticing.

A healthy generator runs with a steady hum. New sounds — knocking, grinding, rattling, surging, or a rough unevenness that wasn't there before — can signal something developing. You don't need to diagnose what the noise means; you just need to notice that it's new and different, and report it to a pro who can investigate safely.

The same goes for the transfer switch: if it ever makes an unusual buzzing or clicking, or a self-test sounds different from its usual rhythm, that's a clue worth passing along. Trust your ears — you know your system's normal sound better than anyone.

✓ You know its normal voice

After living with your system a while, its normal sound becomes familiar. A new noise stands out precisely because you know the old one — so trust that recognition and mention it.

New smells — and one that's urgent

Some smells are worth a routine call. One is worth immediate action. Know the difference.

A burning or hot-electrical smell around the switch, panel, or generator is a reason to stop using the system and call a pro promptly — it can signal an electrical problem you can't see. An oily or fuel smell around the generator is worth reporting at your next service or sooner. None of these are for you to investigate hands-on.

But a gas smell — if you're on natural gas or propane — is different and urgent. Don't troubleshoot, don't flip switches: get everyone to fresh air, and from a safe distance call your gas company or 911. A gas leak is a serious hazard that comes before any concern about the generator itself.

! A gas smell means leave and call — now

If you ever smell gas, treat it as urgent: get everyone out to fresh air and call the gas company or 911 from a safe distance. Don't touch switches or try to find the source yourself.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Watching for warning signs matters everywhere, but a couple of the problems, and how quickly you can respond, differ between town and country.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, help is close, so a warning sign caught early is easily handled with a scheduled visit. The unit is often nearby and easy to glance at, and monitoring alerts reach you readily over good Wi-Fi.

- A nearby unit is easy to check for lights, leaks, and debris.
- Prompt professional help means early signs are simple to resolve.
- Good Wi-Fi makes monitoring alerts a reliable extra set of eyes.
- Shorter outages lower the stakes if a problem does slip through.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, the generator may be farther from the house and help farther still, so catching signs early matters more — and critters and weather exposure are bigger factors. Monitoring is especially valuable where you might not hear a rough self-test from a distant unit.

- A distant rural unit makes monitoring alerts especially valuable — you may not hear a rough test.
- Critters and nests are a more common rural issue — keep an eye out.
- Weather exposure can mean more corrosion and debris to watch for.
- With help farther away, act on warning signs early rather than waiting.

★ Want an extra set of eyes?

Whether it's checking a distant rural unit or setting up alerts that reach you, I'm glad to help you keep watch on your system. Call (330) 200-8042.

Leaks, corrosion, and physical damage

A slow visual check now and then catches the problems that build up quietly.

When you're near the generator, take a look (never a poke): any fluid pooling underneath, rust or corrosion on the unit or its connections, a cracked or damaged enclosure, or a cover that won't close snugly. These develop slowly and are easy to miss unless you occasionally look — and each is worth mentioning to your service pro.

The transfer switch, especially an outdoor one, deserves the same glance: its cover should be intact and closed, with no signs of water getting in or rust taking hold. You're not fixing anything — just noticing, so a pro can address it before weather or time makes it worse.

✓ A glance a season is plenty

You don't need to inspect closely or often — a relaxed look each season, when you're clearing leaves or snow anyway, catches most slow-building problems in good time.

Critters and nests

A warm, sheltered generator is an inviting home for small creatures — and that can cause real trouble.

Mice, insects, and other small critters sometimes nest inside generator enclosures, drawn to the warmth and shelter, especially in fall. Their nests and chewing can cause problems over time. A professional checks for this during service, but if you ever notice signs — nesting material, droppings, or activity around the unit — it's worth mentioning so a pro can look inside safely.

Keeping the area around the generator clear of brush and clutter helps discourage nesting, and that clearing is a safe owner task. But opening the unit to check or clean inside is a pro's job — another case of 'notice and report,' not 'open and investigate.'

✓ Keep the area uninviting

Clearing brush, clutter, and long grass from around the unit makes it a less cozy home for critters. That's a safe, useful bit of prevention you can do yourself.

Tripping breakers and electrical oddities

Some warning signs show up in your home's electricity rather than at the generator.

A breaker related to your backup system that trips repeatedly, lights that flicker oddly during a self-test or transfer, or the transfer switch behaving unexpectedly are all signs worth reporting. You can safely reset a tripped breaker once, but if it trips again, don't keep resetting it — that repeated tripping is a warning, and forcing it is unsafe.

These electrical oddities can point to a range of issues, none of which are for you to diagnose. Note what you observed — which breaker, when, what you saw — and call a licensed electrician. Precise observations help them find the cause faster.

! A breaker that keeps tripping is a warning

Reset a breaker once, fine. If it trips again, stop — repeated tripping means something's wrong, and forcing it on is dangerous. That's a call to an electrician, not a battle of wills.

When the switch itself acts up

The transfer switch is usually trouble-free, but it can show signs worth heeding.

Signs from the switch itself include a warning indicator on it, an unusual buzzing or clicking, a self-test where the transfer sounds or behaves differently, or — if yours has a manual override you were shown — a control that feels stiff or wrong. As always, you notice; you don't open it up. The switch's insides are strictly a licensed electrician's domain.

Because the switch is what keeps your generator's power safely off the utility lines, any sign that it's not behaving normally deserves prompt professional attention. It's rarely dramatic, but it's not something to wait on — our troubleshooting guide covers a switch that won't transfer.

! The switch's insides are off-limits

However curious you are, never open the transfer switch to investigate a sign. Note the behavior and call a pro — the isolation that keeps you safe depends on that switch being right.

Reading the signs: urgent or schedule it?

Not every sign is an emergency. Here's how to tell what needs immediate action from what can wait for a scheduled visit.

Act now

A gas smell (leave and call the gas company or 911); a burning or hot-electrical smell (stop using it, call a pro); a breaker that keeps tripping; or any medical need at risk during an outage. These come first.

Call soon, but calmly

A warning light, a rough or failed self-test, hard starting, new noises, leaks, corrosion, or critters. Schedule a service visit before your next likely outage — prompt, but not a panic.

✓ When unsure, treat it as sooner

If you can't tell whether a sign is urgent, err toward calling sooner — or call me and describe it. It's always better to ask than to wonder through a storm.

Fixing what you spot is a pro's job

Recognizing a problem is yours; repairing it is always a licensed professional's.

Whatever warning sign you catch, the repair is a licensed electrician's or qualified technician's work — diagnosing the cause, correcting it safely, and confirming the system's operation and isolation afterward. Just as the install was permitted, licensed work, so is the fix. Our install-and-permit guide's principles carry over to repairs.

! Spot it, then step back

The moment you've noticed a warning sign, your job is done and the pro's begins. Resist any urge to investigate inside — you've already done the valuable part by catching it.

Safety, briefly

Watching for signs is a safety habit; these truths keep the watching itself safe.

! The generator still makes carbon monoxide

A standby generator burns fuel, so its exhaust still contains carbon monoxide — an invisible, odorless gas that is dangerous to breathe. Yours lives permanently outdoors, and your installer sets it the manufacturer's required distance from windows, doors, and vents so the exhaust drifts safely away from the house. You never have to place it yourself, but do keep that area clear, never box the unit in or enclose it to quiet it down, and keep tested carbon-monoxide alarms inside the house all the same.

Do all your looking hands-off — never open the switch, the panel, or the generator's internals. Treat a gas smell as an urgent 'leave and call.' Keep CO alarms tested inside, since the generator runs during every test and outage. And never keep resetting a breaker that won't stay on.

! Notice, don't investigate

Every warning sign in this guide is something to notice and report — never something to open up and investigate. That single habit keeps your watching safe and useful.

What not to do about a warning sign

A short, firm list of the tempting mistakes to avoid.

- **Don't ignore a warning light** and hope it clears — it rarely does.
- **Don't open the switch, panel, or generator** to investigate.
- **Don't keep resetting a breaker** that trips again and again.
- **Don't troubleshoot a gas smell** — leave and call from a safe distance.
- **Don't wait for the next storm** to find out if a sign mattered.

! Hoping is not a maintenance plan

The costliest response to a warning sign is hoping it goes away. It seldom does — and it tends to announce itself again at the worst possible time. Catch it now instead.

Questions to ask the pro

When you report a sign, these help the pro help you well.

Q: Here's what I noticed — how urgent is it?

Describe the sign plainly. A good pro will tell you whether it needs immediate attention or a scheduled visit.

Q: What likely caused it, and how do I prevent a repeat?

Understanding the cause helps you avoid it next time — often it's battery care or keeping the area clear.

Q: Should I stop using the system until you come?

For some signs — a burning smell, a tripping breaker — yes. Ask so you know whether to rely on it meanwhile.

Q: Can monitoring help me catch this sooner next time?

If you don't have alerts set up, ask whether monitoring would flag this kind of issue earlier — see our monitoring guide.

✓ Your observations speed the fix

The clearer your description of what you noticed — what, when, and how it differed from normal — the faster a pro can help. Noticing carefully is half the value.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most about warning signs, answered plainly.

Q: What's the most important warning sign to watch for?

A warning light or 'attention needed' message — it's your system telling you plainly that it noticed something. Never ignore it; note what it says and call.

Q: My generator starts slowly during its test — is that a problem?

Usually it's the battery, the top cause of a no-start. Report it so a pro can check and replace it before it fails when you need it.

Q: I smell gas near the generator — what do I do?

Treat it as urgent: get everyone to fresh air and call your gas company or 911 from a safe distance. Don't flip switches or try to find the source yourself.

Q: A breaker keeps tripping — can I just keep resetting it?

No — reset it once, but repeated tripping is a warning that something's wrong. Forcing it on is unsafe. Call a licensed electrician.

Q: Can I open the switch to see what's wrong?

Never. The switch and panel insides are off-limits for owner troubleshooting. Notice the sign, note it, and call a licensed pro.

★ Spotted something and unsure?

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and describe what you noticed. I'll help you tell a harmless quirk from a real warning sign, and get a pro moving if needed.

What I do to help

Helping you tell a quirk from a concern is exactly the kind of friendly help I love to give.

- **What I help with:** explaining the warning signs, helping you tell urgent from schedule-it, setting up monitoring alerts, and getting a pro moving.
- **What only a licensed pro does:** diagnose and repair the underlying problem.
- **What I never do:** open the switch, panel, or generator to investigate — I notice and report, just as you do.

★ A second opinion, anytime

When your system does something new, a quick call can tell you whether to relax or to ring a pro. That reassurance is a phone call away. Reach me at (330) 200-8042.

A simple watch-for checklist

Keep this in mind — it's the whole of healthy vigilance.

- ☐ Warning light or 'attention needed' message — never ignore it.
- ☐ A rough, struggling, or missing self-test.
- ☐ Hard or slow starting (usually the battery).
- ☐ New noises, or an oily/burning smell (burning = stop and call).
- ☐ Leaks, corrosion, damage, or critters around the unit.
- ☐ A breaker that keeps tripping (reset once, then call).
- ☐ A gas smell — urgent: leave and call the gas company or 911.

✓ Notice, report, relax

That's the healthy rhythm: notice a sign, report it to a pro, and let them handle it.
You've done your part perfectly by catching it early.

You don't have to do this alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person is one call away.

I hope this guide made spotting warning signs in your backup system feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it in a drawer with your other home papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and don't worry about memorizing anything.

When you'd rather have a hand, that's exactly what I do. I come to your home, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that don't need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. I don't do the licensed electrical or gas work myself — for that I'll help you line up a trustworthy local pro.

★ Bill's Home Tech — real help, close to home

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, or visit BillsHomeTech.com. Serving Atwater and all of Portage County. 30+ years of patient, plain-English tech help — and if you're ever not 100% happy with a visit, I'll make it right or refund it. That's a promise. — Bill

The Warning Signs to Know

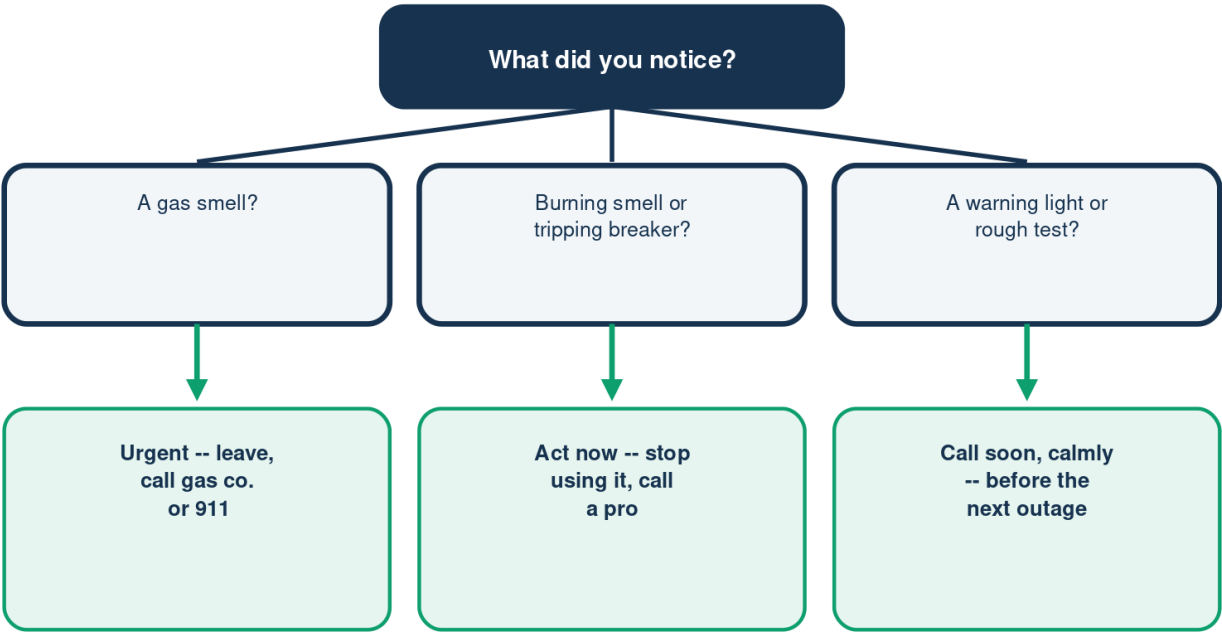
What to notice, and what it usually means

Sign			Usually means
Warning light	The system noticed	something -- call	
Rough self-test	Needs attention	before an outage	
Slow starting	Often the	battery	
New noise/smell	Something's	developing	

You notice; a licensed pro diagnoses and repairs.

Urgent, or Schedule It?

How fast to act on a sign

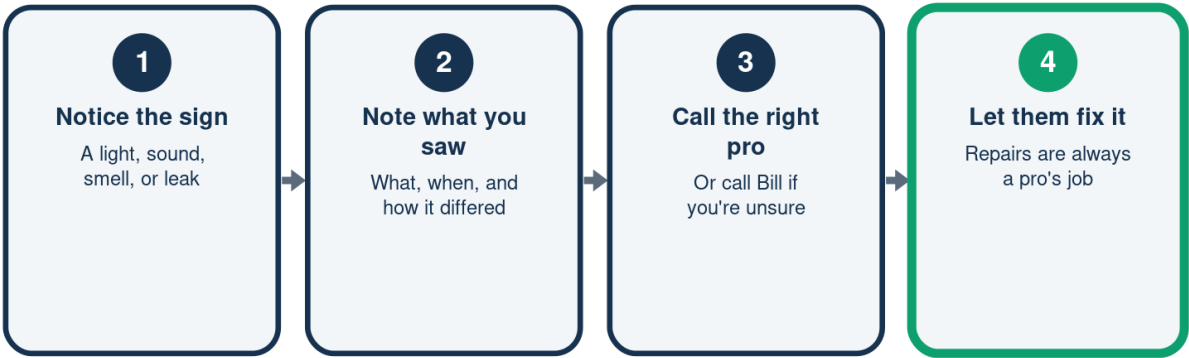


When unsure how urgent, err toward calling sooner.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

Notice, Report, Relax

Your job, done right



Catching it early is the valuable part -- and it's all yours.

Do and Don't

Safe vigilance in a nutshell

	Do	Don't
A light look	Glance for signs	Open the switch
A breaker	Reset once	Reset repeatedly
A gas smell	Leave & call	Troubleshoot it
A warning light	Report it	Ignore & hope

Notice and report -- never open up and investigate.



Need a Real Person?

You do not have to remember all of it.
You just have to remember you can call.
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Bill can screen-share and fix many things remotely — a flat \$49, free for Support Plan members.



A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that comes from using these guides. Thanks for reading, and stay safe out there.

— *Bill*



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