



An Extended Guide · No. 1664

Generator Maintenance for Safety

Simple upkeep that keeps
it safe — and ready

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! Read this first — carbon monoxide is the real danger

A running generator's exhaust contains carbon monoxide — an invisible, odorless gas that can kill in minutes. Never run a generator indoors, in a garage, in a shed, or on a porch, not even with the door open and a fan going. Run it outside only, well away from the house — the safety agencies say at least 20 feet — with the exhaust pointed away from every window, door, and vent. Put battery-backup carbon-monoxide alarms on each floor and outside the bedrooms. If an alarm sounds, or anyone feels dizzy, sick, or sleepy, get everyone into fresh air first and ask questions later. Good upkeep keeps this generator safe to run and ready when you need it — but it is still run outdoors only, at least 20 feet from the house, exhaust pointed away, with your carbon-monoxide alarms on. Maintenance never changes that.

Keeping it up is part of keeping it safe

It's easy to think of maintenance as something you do so the generator lasts longer. That's true — but there's a bigger reason. A neglected generator isn't just unreliable. It can be genuinely dangerous.

I'm Bill. For 30-plus years I've helped folks around Portage County look after the gear in their homes, and a generator is one of the few machines most people own that burns fuel, makes real heat, and carries household electricity all at once. A little honest upkeep is what keeps all three of those from turning into a fire, a shock, or a no-start on the night you finally need it.

The good news is that none of it is hard, and most of it takes only a few minutes. This guide walks through the simple habits that keep a generator safe and dependable, in plain steps, at your own pace.

★ You don't have to remember all of it

There's a short routine at the heart of this — check the oil, keep the fuel fresh, look over the cords, and never fuel it hot — and the rest of these pages just fill that in. If you'd like a hand setting up an upkeep routine that fits your generator, that's exactly the kind of visit I enjoy. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

The 60-second version

If you read nothing else in this guide, read this page.

- ❑ A poorly kept generator isn't just unreliable — it can be a fire, shock, or carbon-monoxide hazard too.
- ❑ Check the oil before every single use and keep it at the right level. Don't lean on the low-oil shutoff to do it for you.
- ❑ Change the oil after the first few hours of break-in, then on your manual's schedule — commonly around every 50 to 100 running hours or once a year.
- ❑ Keep fuel fresh: use a stabilizer, use gasoline within a few months, and store it safely in approved containers away from the house.
- ❑ Never add fuel or oil while the engine is running or hot. Shut it off and let it cool down first.
- ❑ Inspect the cords, plugs, and outlets for damage before each use, and keep the exhaust and cooling vents clear.
- ❑ Test your carbon-monoxide alarms — and the CO shutoff, if the unit has one — as part of your regular upkeep.

! Safe upkeep, safe placement — both, every time

Everything on this page keeps the machine itself safe. It sits right alongside the placement rule that never changes: outdoors only, well away from the house, exhaust pointed away, alarms on.

Why maintenance really is a safety matter

Once you see the specific ways a neglected generator can hurt someone, the little habits in this guide stop feeling like chores and start feeling like what they are — protection.

A generator combines the three things you're normally careful to keep apart: flammable fuel, a hot engine, and live electricity. Keep it maintained and those stay safely in their lanes. Let it slide and they start to overlap.

- **Fire** — spilled or stale fuel, a fuel leak, or adding fuel to a hot engine can ignite. Fuel and heat are a bad mix.
- **Shock** — a cracked, worn, or overheated cord or a damaged outlet can put you at real risk, especially in the wet.
- **A failed start** — old fuel or low oil can leave you with no power at the worst possible moment, in the dark and the cold.
- **Blocked exhaust or vents** — debris, a nest, or snow over the exhaust or cooling vents lets the engine overheat and can't carry the fumes away the way it should.

! Reliable and safe are the same goal here

The very things that keep a generator starting on the first pull — clean oil, fresh fuel, sound cords, clear vents — are the same things that keep it from becoming a hazard. You don't have to choose between the two.

Check the oil before every use

This is the single most important habit for the engine's health, and it takes under a minute.

Before you start the generator, set it on level ground, pull the dipstick, wipe it, and check that the oil sits between the marks. Top it up if it's low, using the oil grade your manual calls for. Running low on oil is how a small engine ruins itself — and a ruined engine is one that quits on you mid-outage.

Many generators have a low-oil shutoff — a sensor that stops the engine, or won't let it start, if the oil is dangerously low. It's a genuinely good feature, but treat it as a backstop, not a substitute. It only catches oil that's already too low to run on safely; it won't tell you the oil is merely getting low or dirty, and like any sensor it can fail. Your own eyes on the dipstick are the real check.

- Check on level ground with the engine off and cool, so the reading is honest.
- Keep the oil between the marks — too much is a problem too, not just too little.
- Keep a little of the right oil on hand so a low reading never stops you.

✓ A shutoff that trips is telling you something

If the low-oil shutoff ever stops your engine, don't just add oil and shrug it off. Ask why it got that low — a leak, burning oil, or simply going too long between checks — and fix the habit, not just the level.

Changing the oil — break-in, then on schedule

Fresh oil is what carries away heat and grit. Old oil does the opposite, and a hot, gritty engine is both shorter-lived and less safe.

A brand-new generator usually needs an early oil change after just the first few running hours — the break-in change — because those first hours shed tiny metal particles as the parts seat in. Your manual will give the exact hour figure. Our new-generator first-start guide walks through that first run and the break-in change in more detail.

After that, change the oil periodically. A commonly cited range is somewhere around every 50 to 100 running hours, or once a year if you run it less than that — but your own manual is the final word, and a hard-working generator during a long outage may want it sooner. When in doubt, cleaner and more often does no harm.

✓ Warm oil drains cleaner

Oil flows out fastest and carries the most grit with it when the engine is warm — not hot. Let a running generator cool from hot to just warm before you drain it, so you get a clean change without risking a burn.

The air filter and spark plug

Two small, inexpensive parts do a lot to keep the engine starting easily and burning cleanly.

The air filter keeps dust and grit out of the engine. When it clogs, the engine struggles for air, gets harder to start, and runs rougher. Check it periodically — commonly each season or per your manual — and clean or replace it when it's dirty. The spark plug lights the fuel; a worn or fouled plug makes for hard starts and poor running, and it's an easy periodic check or swap.

- Check the air filter more often if you run in dusty conditions — a gravel drive, a dirt lot, mowing season.
- Use the filter and plug your manual specifies; the right part matters more than the brand on the box.
- A generator that has gotten hard to start is often just asking for a fresh filter or plug.

✓ Keep the wear parts on the shelf

An air filter and a spark plug are cheap, small, and easy to store. Having spares on hand means a dusty filter or a tired plug never turns into a reason the generator won't run when the lights go out.

Keeping the fuel fresh

Stale gasoline is the most common reason a generator won't start when you need it — and it's completely avoidable.

Gasoline doesn't last forever. Over weeks and months it breaks down and leaves gummy deposits that clog the tiny passages in the carburetor. A gummed-up carburetor is a classic no-start, and clearing it is fiddly work. The fix is simple: don't let fuel sit around old.

Add a fuel stabilizer, which helps gasoline keep longer, and aim to use up the gasoline within a few months rather than letting it linger. Ethanol-free gasoline, if you can get it, tends to store better, because the ethanol in ordinary gas attracts moisture over time.

- Treat fuel with a stabilizer if it may sit more than a few weeks.
- Rotate your supply — use the oldest fuel first and top up with fresh, rather than hoarding one big old can.
- Ethanol-free gas stores longer; either way, fresher is always better.

✓ Run it dry, or keep it full and treated

Two honest approaches work: for a unit you rarely use, some folks run the fuel down so little is left sitting; for one you exercise regularly, keep it full of fresh, stabilized fuel. Your manual will tell you which suits your generator best.

Storing fuel safely

Fresh fuel is no good to you if it's stored in a way that puts the house at risk. A little care here matters as much as anything else in this guide.

Keep gasoline only in containers made and approved for it, sealed and labeled, in a cool, well-ventilated spot. The two things to keep it away from are the living space and anything that could set it off — so not next to the furnace, the water heater, a pilot light, or anywhere a spark or flame lives.

- Use approved, tightly sealed fuel containers — never milk jugs or random bottles.
- Store it away from the house and well away from any flame, pilot light, or spark.
- Keep it cool and out of direct sun, and label it with the date so you know how old it is.
- Store only what you'll reasonably use, and follow any local rules on how much fuel you may keep.

! Fuel and ignition sources don't mix

Gasoline gives off vapors even in a closed can, and those vapors are what catch fire — they can travel along the floor to a distant flame. Keeping fuel away from every ignition source isn't fussiness; it's the whole point of storing it safely.

The one fire rule: never fuel a hot or running engine

If you take a single fire-safety rule from this guide, make it this one. It has a page to itself on purpose.

Never add fuel — or oil — while the engine is running, and never while it's still hot. Gasoline and its vapors can ignite on a hot engine or exhaust in an instant, and a spill onto hot metal is exactly how a refueling turns into a fire. This is not a rare freak accident; it's a predictable one, which is why the rule is absolute.

The habit is simple: when the tank runs low, shut the generator off and let it cool down before you refuel. Yes, that means a short pause in your power during a long outage. Plan for it — top off before a long overnight run, and keep a flashlight handy — but never trade that pause for the risk of fueling it hot.

! Off, cool, then fuel — in that order, every time

Shut it off. Let it cool. Then fill it, away from any flame, and wipe up any spill before you restart. There is no outage short enough, and no hurry big enough, to justify pouring gasoline near a hot engine. This is the rule I never bend, and I hope you won't either.

Inspect the cords, plugs, and outlets

The electricity a generator makes is as real as the power from the wall, and a damaged cord carries the same shock and fire risk — outdoors, in the weather, where it matters even more.

Before each use, look and feel along the whole length of every cord you'll use. You're checking for cuts, cracks, stiff or brittle spots, and anywhere the outer jacket is worn through. At the plugs and the generator's outlets, watch for bent prongs and for any melted, browned, or discolored plastic — discoloration means heat, and heat means trouble.

- Any cut, crack, or exposed wire means the cord is done — replace it, don't tape it.
- Melted or browned plugs or outlets point to a loose or overloaded connection; stop using them.
- Use only outdoor-rated cords, kept up off wet ground, and never run them pinched under a door or rug.
- Uncoil cords fully before a big load — a tightly coiled cord traps heat.

! A hidden nick is still a live wire

The dangerous damage is often the kind you only find by running your hand along the cord — a nick under the jacket, a soft spot, a cracked plug. Our extension-cords guide goes deeper on choosing and caring for cords, but a slow look-over before each use is the habit that catches the worst surprises.

Keep it breathing — and test the alarms

An engine needs to take in cooling air and push out its exhaust freely. Part of upkeep is making sure nothing blocks either one — and that the alarms guarding you are actually working.

Before you run it, check that the exhaust port and the cooling vents are clear. Between uses, a generator sitting in a shed or under a cover is a favorite spot for insect nests, spider webs, mouse nests, and leaves. A blocked exhaust or clogged vents let the engine overheat and keep it from carrying its fumes away cleanly. In winter, keep the exhaust clear of snow and ice as well.

Make alarm testing part of the routine

- ❑ Press the test button on your carbon-monoxide alarms monthly, and confirm each one still sounds.
- ❑ Replace alarm batteries when they chirp, and replace the whole alarm by the date printed on it.
- ❑ If your generator has an automatic CO shutoff, test it as your manual describes so you know it works.
- ❑ Treat a dead or missing alarm the same as a flat tire — fix it before the generator ever runs.

! The alarms are upkeep too

It's tempting to think of maintenance as engine-and-fuel work only. But the carbon-monoxide alarms inside the house are part of the same safety system, and a tested alarm is worth every bit as much as a fresh tank of gas. Our CO-alarms guide covers where they go and how many you need.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

How much you actually run the generator changes which upkeep habits matter most — even though the safety basics are the same in every yard.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town, a generator often sits for months and then runs for a short outage or two. The biggest risk here is simply forgetting it — letting the oil sit, the fuel go stale, and the alarm batteries die between the rare times you need it.

- Stale fuel is the number-one reason an occasional-use generator won't start — stabilize it and use it up within a few months.
- Put a reminder on the calendar to exercise it and test the alarms, since months can slip by in town without a single outage.
- Keep just enough fresh fuel on hand, safely stored — a small, rotated supply beats one big can of old gas.
- A quick oil check and cord look-over matters even more when the unit has been sitting untouched for a long while.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, the generator may run hard for long stretches during longer outages. The wear adds up fast, so tracking hours and keeping parts and fuel ready is what keeps it both safe and dependable when help is farther away.

- Track running hours — an hour meter takes the guesswork out of when oil and filters are due during a long outage.
- Keep spare oil, an air filter, and a spark plug on hand, since a store run may not be possible in the middle of a storm.
- Store plenty of fresh, stabilized fuel safely — well away from the house and any flame or pilot light.
- Long overnight runs mean checking the oil, exhaust, and cords more often, and always letting it cool before you refuel.

★ Not sure what your generator needs?

Whether yours runs twice a year or for days at a time, I'm glad to help you set up a simple upkeep routine that fits how you actually use it — and to make sure the safety basics are covered. Call (330) 200-8042.

Run it now and then, so it's ready

A generator that only ever runs during a real emergency is a generator you're testing for the first time at the worst possible moment. A little regular exercise fixes that.

Starting it up and letting it run for a bit on a calm day does several good things at once: it keeps the battery charged and the parts moving, circulates the oil, keeps fuel from sitting stale, and — most important — lets you find any problem now, in daylight, instead of at 2 a.m. in a storm. Our exercise-and-testing guide walks through how often and how to do it under a little load.

An hour meter is a small, inexpensive helper here. It counts the generator's actual running hours, so instead of guessing whether you're due for an oil change, you simply know. It turns 'I think it's been a while' into a real number.

- A short, regular run keeps it ready and the fuel fresh.
- Exercise it outdoors, 20-plus feet out, with alarms on — the placement rule holds even for a test run.
- Note the hour-meter reading when you service it, so the next interval is easy to plan.

✓ Test it on your terms, not the storm's

The whole point of exercising a generator is to move the surprises to a calm afternoon. Five minutes now and then beats discovering a dead battery or a gummed carburetor when the power's already out.

Know what's yours to do, and what's a pro's

A big part of doing this safely is knowing where the do-it-yourself part ends. There's no shame in handing off the harder jobs — it's the smart, safe move.

The routine upkeep in this guide is well within reach for most folks. But when a generator needs real repair — a carburetor cleaned or rebuilt, an engine that runs rough or won't hold a start, a fuel leak, a valve adjustment — that's a job for a small-engine shop with the right tools and know-how. Anything involving the home's wiring is a licensed electrician's work, not a repair to improvise.

- **You can handle:** checking and changing oil, cleaning or swapping the air filter, keeping fuel fresh, inspecting cords.
- **A small-engine shop handles:** carburetor work, engine repair, fuel-system leaks, and anything you can't confidently diagnose.
- **A licensed electrician handles:** any panel connection, transfer equipment, or house wiring — never a DIY fix.
- **When in doubt, stop.** A generator you're unsure about is safer off until someone qualified has looked at it.

★ I'll help you figure out which is which

Not sure whether something's a quick fix or a shop job? That's a fine reason to call. I'll help you sort it out, and line you up with a trustworthy local pro when that's what it needs. Reach me at (330) 200-8042.

A simple routine you can actually keep

You don't need a thick logbook. Here's the whole thing on one page — a rhythm you can settle into without much thought.

- ❑ **Before every use:** check the oil, glance over the cords and outlets, and confirm you have fresh fuel.
- ❑ **Every use:** run it outdoors only, 20-plus feet out, exhaust aimed away, with CO alarms on — upkeep never changes that.
- ❑ **Monthly:** test the CO alarms, and test the CO shutoff if your unit has one.
- ❑ **Each season, or per your manual:** change the oil, and check or replace the air filter and spark plug.
- ❑ **Now and then:** exercise the generator so it stays ready and the fuel stays fresh.
- ❑ **Once a year:** a fuller look-over, and refresh any stored fuel that's getting old.

✓ Tie it to something you already do

The routines that stick are the ones hooked to a habit you already have. Check the generator when you change the clocks, test the alarms when you pay a certain bill — whatever gives you a regular nudge.

How this fits with the rest of your setup

Maintenance touches nearly every other part of owning a generator, so a few of our other guides pick up where this one leaves off.

If a cord looks worn or you're not sure you've got the right one, our extension-cords guide covers choosing, sizing, and caring for them in detail. If your generator is brand new, our new-generator first-start guide walks through that first run and the early break-in oil change. And for keeping it exercised and tested between outages, our exercise-and-testing guide lays out a simple schedule.

The thread running through all of them is the same one running through this guide: a generator you look after is a generator you can trust — to start when you need it, and to run without becoming a hazard while it does.

★ One visit can tie it all together

If you'd rather not piece it together from several guides, I can come by and set the whole thing up with you at once — upkeep routine, safe storage, cords, and alarms. A first visit is a flat \$99. Call (330) 200-8042.

Maintenance myths — and the truth

A few comfortable beliefs lead people to skip the very steps that keep a generator safe. Here's the honest version of each.

Myth	Fact
'It ran fine last time, so it's ready now.'	Fuel goes stale and oil can drop while it sits. Check before every start, not just the first.
'The low-oil shutoff will protect the engine for me.'	It's a last-resort backstop, not a substitute for checking the oil with the dipstick yourself.
'I can top off the tank while it runs — it's quick.'	Never. Fuel near a hot engine can catch fire. Shut it off and let it cool first, every time.
'Old gas is fine if I pour fresh gas on top.'	Stale fuel still gums the carburetor. Use fresh, stabilized fuel and rotate your supply.
'Maintenance is only about making it last longer.'	It's also safety — fuel fires, shock from damaged cords, and a no-start when you need it most.

! A shortcut that worked once is still a shortcut

The dangerous thing about these beliefs is that skipping a step usually seems fine — right up until the one time it isn't. Trust the routine, not the fact that you got away with it before.

Questions worth asking

A few plain questions that clear up most of the upkeep confusion I hear.

Q: How do I know if my oil is low?

Check it with the dipstick before every use, on level ground, with the engine off and cool. Keep it between the marks and top up with the oil grade your manual calls for.

Q: What fuel should I keep on hand, and how much?

Fresh gasoline — ethanol-free if you can get it — treated with a stabilizer and stored in an approved container away from the house and any flame. Keep only what you'll use within a few months, and follow any local limits.

Q: How do I tell a cord is safe to use?

Run your hand along the whole length for cuts, cracks, or stiff spots, and check the plugs for bent prongs or melted, discolored plastic. When in doubt, replace it.

Q: Is an hour meter really worth it?

For many folks, yes — it's an inexpensive way to know exactly when service is due instead of guessing, which is especially handy during a long run.

★ There's no silly question here

Upkeep is one of those things that feels harder before you've done it than after. If any of it feels fuzzy, call and ask — I'd far rather walk you through it than have you guess. Reach me at (330) 200-8042.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most from folks working through this guide, answered plainly.

Q: Does keeping it well maintained change where I can run it?

No. Even a perfectly maintained generator gives off carbon monoxide, so it still runs outdoors only, at least 20 feet from the house, exhaust pointed away, with CO alarms on.

Q: Can I use last winter's leftover gas?

Only if it was stabilized, stored well, and is still fresh — and even then, be cautious. Stale gasoline is the most common reason a generator won't start when you need it.

Q: Do I really need to run it between outages?

Yes. A short, regular run keeps it ready, circulates the oil, keeps fuel from going stale, and lets you catch a problem on a calm day. Our exercise-and-testing guide shows how.

Q: What can I safely do myself, and what needs a pro?

Oil, air filter, fresh fuel, and cord checks are all fine to do yourself. Carburetor work, engine repair, and any wiring are jobs for a small-engine shop or a licensed electrician.

! Read it again if it's been a while

This guide is worth another look each year, or any time you buy a new generator, move, or change how much you run it. Habits fade; a quick refresher keeps them sharp.

Bringing it all together

Every page here points back to one idea: a looked-after generator is a safe, dependable one.

Check the oil before every use. Keep the fuel fresh and stored safely. Look over the cords. Keep the vents and exhaust clear. Test the alarms. Never fuel it hot. And exercise it now and then so nothing surprises you in the storm. None of it is hard, and all of it adds up to a machine you can count on.

Keep this guide with your other home papers, and don't feel you have to hold it all in your head. The routine on the simple-routine page is the whole thing in one place — come back to it whenever you need a nudge.

★ Let's set up your routine together

On a visit I'll help you build an upkeep routine that fits your generator and how you use it, check your cords and alarms, and make sure your fuel is stored safely. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

If you remember only one thing

Out of everything in this guide, one habit protects you more than any other.

Never add fuel or oil to a hot or running engine. Shut it off, let it cool, then fuel it away from any flame. Everything else here — the oil checks, the fresh fuel, the cord look-overs — keeps the generator dependable. This one keeps it from starting a fire.

! Say it back to yourself

Off, cool, then fuel. Fresh fuel, stored safely. Sound cords, clear vents, tested alarms. And always, always, run it outdoors and well away from the house. That's upkeep and safety in one breath.

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 keeping your generator safe and ready to run 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

Maintenance = Safety

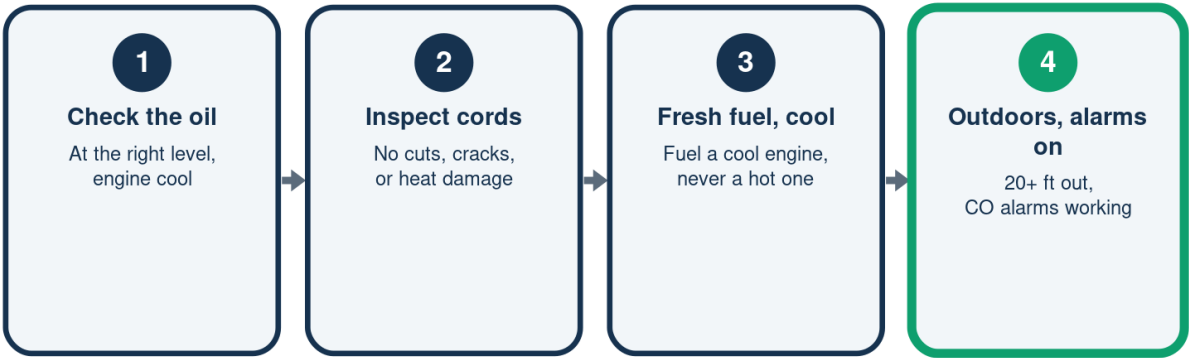
Why each upkeep task is really a safety task

Task		Safety reason
Oil level	Check each use	Won't quit on you
Oil change	Per the manual	Cooler, clean run
Air and plug	Clean or replace	Easy, clean start
Cords	Look for damage	No shock or fire
Fuel	Keep it fresh	Starts, no gum

A looked-after generator is a safe generator -- always follow your manual.

Before Every Use

A two-minute check before you pull the cord



Same quick check every time -- then start it, outdoors.

How Often?

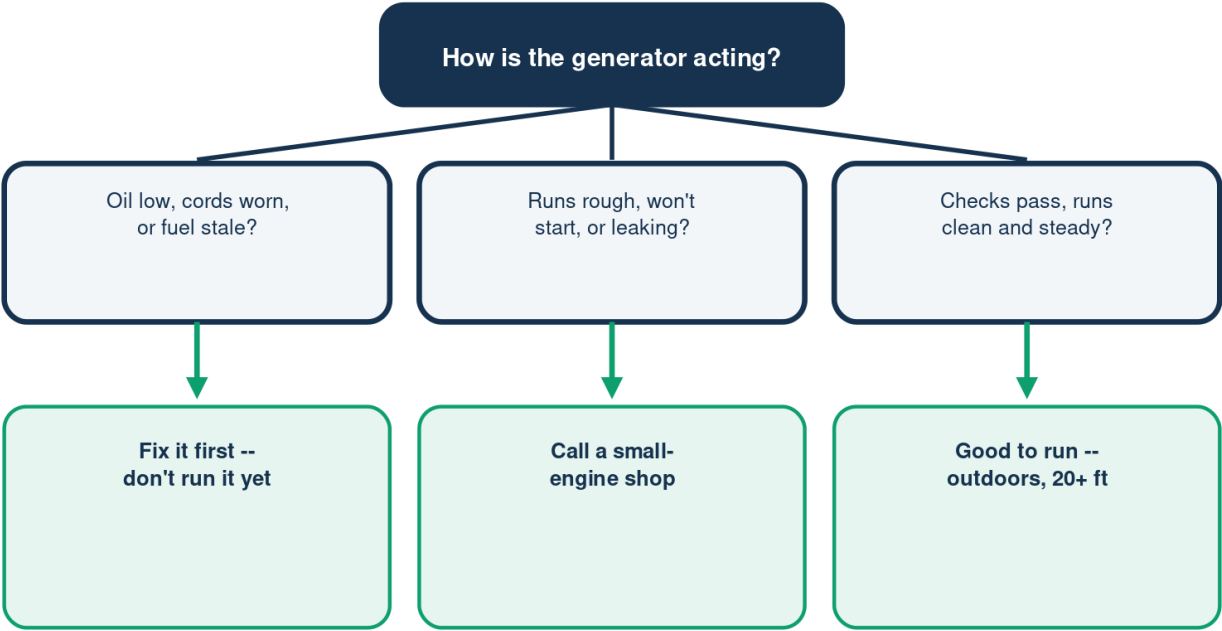
Rough intervals -- your manual is the final word

Task			Rough interval -- follow manual
Oil level	Check		Every use
Oil change	Replace		~50-100 hrs
Air filter	Clean or swap		Each season
Spark plug	Inspect		Per manual
Fuel	Refresh		Every few mos
CO alarms	Test		Monthly

Ranges are typical only -- your own manual always wins.

Safe to Run, or Call a Pro?

Let the condition decide, not the hurry



Never add fuel or oil to a hot or running engine -- let it cool first.

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



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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.

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