



An Extended Guide · No. 1743

Surge Protector vs. a Plain Power Strip

How to tell them apart
— and why it matters

Tech Made Simple — Service Made Personal

BillsHomeTech.com · (330) 200-8042 · Atwater, Ohio

Free & printable — share it with someone who needs it



Book a visit —
billshometech.com/book

! Read this first — two kinds of protection, one safety rule

There are two kinds of surge protection in this guide, and they are not the same job. A whole-home surge protector wires into your electrical panel, where the power is always live and a mistake can be deadly — that is strictly a licensed electrician's work, almost always with a permit, and never a do-it-yourself project. (It isn't something I do myself, either; I help you understand it, choose wisely, and line up a trustworthy local pro.) The other kind — the surge-protector strips and plug-in units you use at the wall — are perfectly safe for you to set up on your own. One honest note either way: no surge protector is a lightning rod or an iron-clad guarantee, so in a violent electrical storm, unplugging a treasured device is still the surest protection of all. This one is entirely about the plug-in kind you handle yourself — telling a real surge protector apart from a plain power strip — which is the safest and easiest place to start.

The most common mix-up I run into

They sit side by side on the same store shelf, look almost exactly alike, and often cost about the same. Yet one quietly guards your electronics and the other does nothing of the kind. Let's make sure you never confuse the two again.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. In 30-plus years of helping folks with the gadgets in their homes, this is the single question I answer most: 'Bill, isn't a power strip a surge protector?' It's a fair question, and the answer surprises almost everyone.

The happy news is that this is the easy, do-it-yourself side of surge protection. No electrician, no permit, nothing to be nervous about — just a little know-how so you buy and use the right thing. That's exactly what this guide gives you.

★ There's no silly question here

If you're not sure what's plugged in behind your television right now, that's perfectly normal. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and I'll help you sort it out, with nothing to sell you.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these few things, you'll never buy the wrong one again.

- ❑ A plain power strip only splits one outlet into several. It adds places to plug in and nothing more.
- ❑ A surge protector looks the same but has protective parts inside that soak up spikes and steer them safely away from your gear.
- ❑ Tell them apart by the label: a real protector says 'surge protector,' lists a joule rating, and usually has an indicator light.
- ❑ Look for a UL-listed safety mark and often a warranty — a plain strip has none of these.
- ❑ A plain strip is fine for a lamp or a fan; anything with a circuit board deserves a real protector.
- ❑ Never plug one strip into another, and always plug a protector straight into a grounded three-prong wall outlet.

✓ One picture to hold onto

A power strip is a longer arm for your outlet. A surge protector is that same arm with a bodyguard built in. From the outside they look alike — the bodyguard is what you're really paying for.

What a plain power strip really is

Let's start with the simpler of the two, because once you see what it is, you'll see what it isn't.

A plain power strip is an extension of your wall outlet. It takes the one or two outlets on your wall and turns them into a neat row of six or eight. That's the entire job — more places to plug in. A handy thing, and there's nothing wrong with it for what it is.

But there is nothing inside a plain strip to stop a surge. When a spike of voltage comes down the line, it passes straight through the strip and on into whatever is plugged in, exactly as if the strip weren't there. The strip doesn't even notice.

✓ Handy, but not a guardian

Think of a plain strip like a longer garden hose. It gets the water where you need it, but it does nothing to control the pressure. If a surge of pressure comes through, it comes through.

What a surge protector adds inside

A surge protector starts as that same row of outlets — and then it adds the part that matters.

Tucked inside a real surge protector are small guardian parts, most commonly little components called metal-oxide varistors, or MOVs. You'll never see them, but they're the whole point of the device.

Here's how an MOV behaves, in plain terms: during normal power it stays completely out of the way, doing nothing. But the instant the voltage climbs higher than it should, it springs open a path and diverts that extra energy safely to ground, away from your electronics. It's a bit like a pressure-relief valve that opens only when the pressure gets dangerous.

That's the difference you're paying for — parts you can't see, doing a job a plain strip simply can't. Everything else in this guide is about spotting which one you're actually holding.

✓ You'll meet the word 'joule'

The amount of surge energy a protector can soak up over its life is measured in joules. You don't need a number in your head — our guide on reading a protector's rating explains it in plain English.

Why so many folks mix them up

This confusion isn't your fault. Everything about how these are made and sold invites it.

The two look nearly identical — the same flat bar, the same row of outlets, the same cord. They sit in the same aisle, sometimes on the same hook, and often carry similar price tags. Nothing about the shape tells you which is which.

The wording muddies it further. Some real protectors are labeled 'power strip' in big letters, and some plain strips are dressed up to look protective. Plenty of cheap 'strips' offer no protection at all, no matter how sturdy they seem. You have to read a little more closely than the front-of-package name.

! If it doesn't clearly say so, assume it doesn't

The safest rule is simple: if a strip doesn't plainly say 'surge protector' and back it up with a joule rating, treat it as a plain power strip with no protection. When in doubt, it's a strip.

Five quick ways to tell them apart

You can settle it in about ten seconds, right there in the store or behind your TV. Look for these five signs.

- **The words.** A real one says 'surge protector' or 'surge suppressor,' not merely 'power strip.'
- **A joule rating.** A number of joules printed on the label or box means it actually has protection to measure.
- **An indicator light.** Most protectors have a small 'protected' light, and sometimes a 'grounded' one too.
- **A UL-listed mark.** Look for the safety-testing mark — the standard for surge devices is called UL 1449.
- **A warranty.** Real protectors often carry one, sometimes even a connected-equipment guarantee. A plain strip rarely does.

✓ Two of these settle it fast

If you're in a hurry, just look for the words 'surge protector' and a joule number. If both are there, it's the real thing. If neither is, it's a plain strip — put it back if you're protecting electronics.

What each one is right for

A plain strip isn't useless — it just has a smaller job. Here's how to give each one work it's actually suited to.

A plain power strip is fine for

Simple, sturdy things that don't have a delicate brain inside: a lamp, a fan, a phone charger, a string of seasonal lights. If losing it to a rare spike wouldn't cost much or hurt much, a plain strip does the job.

A surge protector is for

Anything with a circuit board or a computer chip: your television and the gear it feeds, a computer, the modem and router, a game console, and increasingly modern appliances. These are the pricey, sensitive things a surge can ruin, so they earn a real protector.

✓ Match the guard to the value

The rule of thumb: the more it would hurt to replace, the more it deserves a real surge protector — or, for a computer or medical device, a battery backup, which our UPS guide covers.

Reading the package like a pro

Everything you need is printed right on the box or the underside of the strip. Here's the quick translation.

Look for this	What it tells you
'Surge protector'	It has real protection
A joule rating	How much it can soak up
An indicator light	You can see it's working
UL listed / UL 1449	It's been safety-tested
Only 'power strip'	No protection — outlets only

✓ **Snap a photo of the label**

If you're comparing a couple of them, take a phone photo of each label. It's far easier to read the small print on your screen, where you can zoom in, than squinting at the shelf.

A surge protector needs a real ground

Here's a catch that trips people up: a surge protector only works if the outlet it's in is properly grounded.

Remember how the protector diverts extra energy safely to ground? That only works if there truly is a ground for it to send the energy to. Plug the protector straight into a proper three-prong wall outlet — not into an extension cord, and not into another strip.

In older homes with two-prong outlets, or where the wiring was never grounded, a protector can't do its job. And a three-prong outlet doesn't always mean a real ground behind it. An inexpensive outlet tester, or an electrician, can confirm — our grounding guide walks through this simply.

! Never use a 'cheater' adapter

Please don't use one of those little 3-to-2-prong adapters to force a protector into an old two-prong outlet. It defeats the ground, and without a ground the protector can't protect. Have an electrician add a grounded outlet instead.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

The difference between a strip and a protector matters everywhere, but where you live shapes how much is riding on getting it right.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town and the suburbs, your power lines are often shorter and sometimes buried, so you face somewhat less lightning exposure. Even so, everyday surges from your own appliances never stop, and the electronics behind your TV and desk are worth guarding with the real thing.

- Walk the house and swap any plain strip that's guarding electronics for a true surge protector.
- Plain strips are still fine here for lamps, fans, and chargers.
- City water keeps flowing in an outage, so your focus is the electronics themselves.
- A whole-home protector at the panel is a fine next step — see our whole-home guide.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, long overhead lines cross open land for miles, giving nearby lightning many chances to jump aboard, and storms tend to hit harder with less in the way. The stakes on a real protector are simply higher, and you've got costly hardwired gear a plug-in unit can't reach at all.

- With more surge exposure, a plain strip masquerading as a protector is a riskier mistake to make.
- A 240-volt well pump, the furnace, and other hardwired gear need a whole-home unit — a plug-in strip can't touch them.
- Keep good plug-in protectors on the TV, computer, and network gear that you can reach.
- Longer, more frequent outages make the jolt when power returns a regular visitor — one more reason for real protection.

★ Not sure what you've got behind the TV?

That's one of the easiest things for me to check. Tell me what's plugged in where, or let me stop by, and we'll make sure the real protectors are on the things that need them. Call (330) 200-8042.

The one habit to never pick up

There's a common shortcut I want to steer you away from, because it undoes your protection and can start a fire.

Daisy-chaining means plugging one power strip or protector into another to reach farther or add still more outlets. It's tempting when an outlet is across the room, but it's genuinely unsafe. Strung-together strips can draw more current than the wiring is built for and overheat.

It also ruins any surge protection you thought you had. Protectors are built to sit directly on the wall outlet, not behind another strip. Chain them and you can't count on either one to do its job.

! One strip, one wall outlet

Plug each surge protector or power strip straight into its own wall outlet — never into another strip, and never into an extension cord. If you're out of outlets, that's a sign to have an electrician add one, not to chain strips together.

Not every 'protector' is a good one

Even among the real ones, quality varies — and even a good one doesn't last forever.

Some bargain-bin units print 'surge protector' on the front with very little behind it. That's exactly why the marks matter: a joule rating, an indicator light, and a UL-listed safety mark tell you there's real, tested protection inside, not just a promise on the packaging. Our guide on choosing a protector goes deeper on picking a quality one.

And here's the part that fools everyone: a surge protector wears out. Its guardian parts give a little with each surge and with age, until one day they can't protect anymore — even though the outlets still power your devices. Our when-to-replace guide explains the signs to watch for.

✓ The light is your friend

That little 'protected' light isn't decoration. When it's on, the protection is doing its job; if it ever goes dark while the strip still has power, the protection is used up. Our indicator-light guide covers what each light means.

Matching the right one to the job

You don't need the fanciest protector on every outlet. A little matching saves money and keeps the important things well guarded.

- **A lamp, a fan, or a charger:** a plain power strip is perfectly fine.
- **A TV, computer, or network gear:** a real, quality surge protector — ideally with protected jacks for the cable or network line.
- **A desktop computer or anything you can't lose:** consider a battery backup (a UPS), which includes surge protection and rides out short outages too.
- **The furnace, AC, or well pump:** these are hardwired — no plug-in unit reaches them, so that's the whole-home protector's job.

✓ This is where layering starts

Choosing the right plug-in protector for each spot is the first layer of a strong setup. Pairing it with a whole-home unit at the panel is the second — our layered-protection guide shows how they cover each other's gaps.

So are plain power strips useless?

Not at all. I don't want you tossing every strip in the house — they just need the right kind of work.

A plain power strip is a fine, inexpensive way to turn one outlet into several for things that don't need protecting. The workbench lamp, the box fan, the phone and tablet chargers, the seasonal lights — a plain strip handles all of that happily.

The mistake isn't owning plain strips. It's trusting one to protect a television or a computer. Keep the plain ones for the simple jobs, put real protectors on the sensitive gear, and you've spent your money exactly right.

★ A little goes a long way

Getting this one distinction right protects most of what matters in a home for very little money. It's the kind of small, sensible win I love helping folks with. Call (330) 200-8042 if you'd like a hand.

A quick lap around your house

Here's a five-minute project that tells you exactly where you stand. No tools required — just your reading glasses.

Go to each spot where expensive electronics live — the TV stand, the computer desk, the shelf with the modem and router — and gently pull out the strip they're plugged into. Turn it over and read what it actually says.

If it says 'surge protector' with a joule rating and has a light, wonderful. If it only says 'power strip,' make a note to swap it for a real protector. Move the plain strip over to a lamp or a fan, where it's a fine fit, and you've lost nothing.

★ I'll do this lap with you

On a visit I'll go around your home, read every strip, and swap in the right protectors where they belong — tidy cords and all. I'll also show you where each light is and what it means. Call or text (330) 200-8042.

Common mistakes people make

Knowing the usual slip-ups ahead of time makes them easy to sidestep. Here are the ones I see most.

- **Trusting a plain strip** to protect a television or computer — it does nothing of the sort.
- **Assuming more outlets means more protection.** The number of outlets and the protection inside are two different things.
- **Grabbing the cheapest 'strip'** without reading the label to see if it's actually a protector.
- **Daisy-chaining strips** or running a protector off an extension cord instead of the wall.
- **Forgetting the data lines.** Surges ride in on cable and network cords too — a protector with data jacks guards those.

! The costliest mistake is the quiet one

The plain strip behind the TV causes no trouble at all — until the day a surge sails right through it. Because nothing looks wrong, folks trust it for years. A ten-second label check today prevents that surprise.

A few myths, cleared up

This topic collects some tall tales. Here are the ones I hear most, set straight.

- **'A power strip and a surge protector are the same thing.'** No — only one has protective parts inside.
- **'The more outlets, the more protection.'** No — outlets and protection have nothing to do with each other.
- **'My surge protector will last forever.'** No — it wears out over time and use. The indicator light tells you when.
- **'Any three-prong outlet is grounded.'** Not always — someone may have swapped the outlet with no ground behind it.
- **'Expensive automatically means better protection.'** Not necessarily — read the label and the marks, not just the price.

✓ Read the strip, not the shelf tag

Almost every myth here comes from judging a strip by its shape or its price instead of its label. Flip it over, read the small print, and the truth is right there.

A simple shopping checklist

Take this with you, on paper or on your phone, and you'll come home with the right thing every time.

- ☐ It clearly says 'surge protector,' not just 'power strip.'
- ☐ It lists a joule rating on the label or box.
- ☐ It has an indicator light I can see — ideally 'protected' and 'grounded.'
- ☐ It carries a UL-listed safety mark.
- ☐ It has enough well-spaced outlets for my bulky plugs and adapters.
- ☐ It has protected jacks for the cable or network line if I need them.

★ I earn nothing on the box

I don't sell protectors and I take no commission — so when I point you to what to look for, it's honest advice, plain and simple. Call (330) 200-8042 and I'll help you pick without the guesswork.

Where to go from here

Telling the two apart is step one. When you're ready, these sibling guides pick up right where this one leaves off.

If you now know you want a real protector but aren't sure which, our guide on choosing a protector walks through the features that matter. To make sense of that joule number and the other ratings, see our guide on reading a protector's rating. And to keep the ones you own honest over the years, the indicator-light guide and the when-to-replace guide are short and handy.

For the bigger picture, the layered-protection guide shows how your plug-in protectors team up with a whole-home unit at the panel, and the whole-home guide explains that side. You don't have to read them all at once — just reach for the one that fits your next question.

✓ One thing at a time

There's no need to do everything this week. Get the plain strips off your electronics, put real protectors there instead, and you've already handled the biggest, cheapest win in the whole set.

How I can help

This is exactly the kind of small, practical thing I'm glad to take off your plate.

I'll come to your home, check every strip behind your televisions, computers, and network gear, and tell you plainly which are real protectors and which are just power strips. Where you need the real thing, I'll set it up neatly, cords managed so nothing's a trip hazard, and show you where the lights are and what they mean.

I sell no products and earn no commission, so my advice is honest and yours to keep. And if the conversation turns to the hardwired things — the furnace or well pump that no plug-in unit can reach — I'll explain the whole-home option and line you up with a trustworthy electrician for that part.

★ Real help, close to home

A first in-home visit is a flat \$99, and for simple questions I can often help over the phone or a screen-share for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. Call or text (330) 200-8042.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most when folks first sort out strips from protectors, answered plainly.

Q: What's the real difference between a power strip and a surge protector?

A plain power strip just splits one outlet into several — it adds outlets and nothing more. A surge protector looks the same but has protective parts inside that soak up voltage spikes and steer them safely to ground, shielding whatever's plugged in.

Q: How can I tell which one I already have?

Read the label or the underside. A real protector says 'surge protector,' lists a joule rating, usually has an indicator light, and carries a UL-listed mark, often with a warranty. If it only says 'power strip,' treat it as one — no protection.

Q: Is it ever okay to use a plain power strip?

Absolutely — for simple things like a lamp, a fan, or a phone charger. Just don't trust one to protect a television, a computer, or other sensitive electronics. Those deserve a real surge protector.

Q: Can I plug one strip into another to reach farther?

No — that's daisy-chaining, and it's a fire risk that also undoes the protection. Plug each strip or protector straight into its own wall outlet. If you're short on outlets, have an electrician add one.

★ Still have a question?

That's what I'm here for. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and ask away — there's truly no such thing as a silly question about this.

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 telling a surge protector from a power strip 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 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

Power Strip vs. Surge Protector

The same shape, a very different job

	Power strip	Surge protector
Adds outlets	Yes	Yes
Stops surges	No	Yes
Joule rating	No	Yes
Indicator light	No	Usually
Warranty	No	Often

They look alike on the shelf -- only one guards your electronics.

How to Tell Them Apart

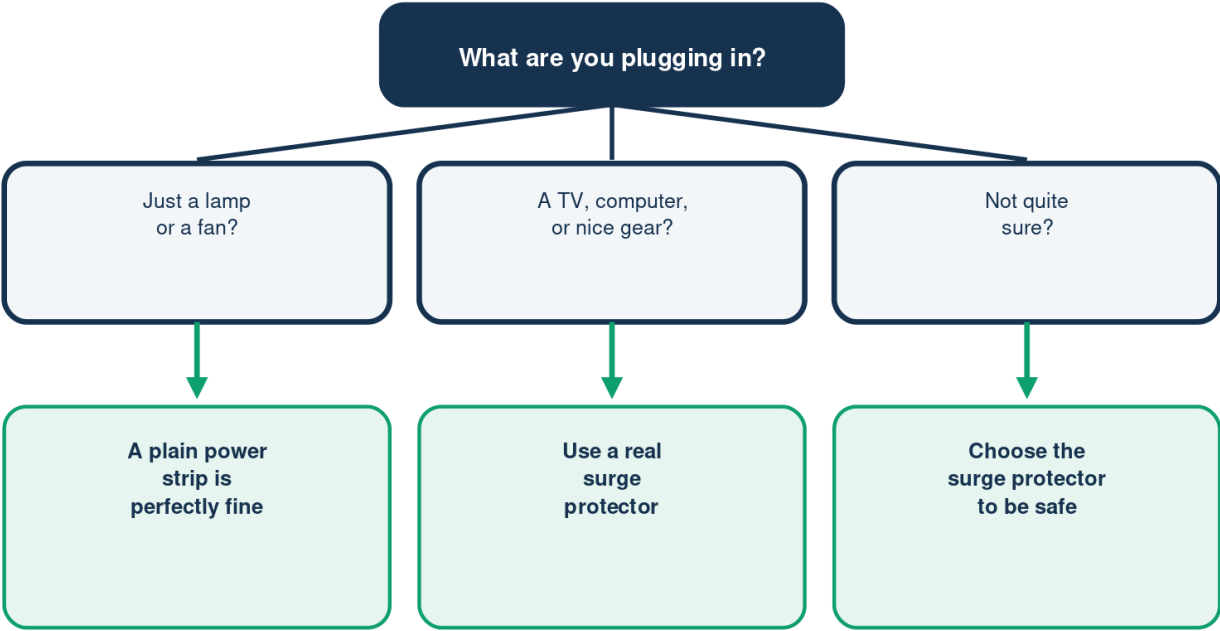
Four quick things to check on the label



Two or more of these? It's a real protector, not a plain strip.

Which One Do I Need?

Let what you're plugging in decide



A plain strip adds outlets only -- it stops no surges at all.

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

What to Look For on the Box

The words that tell a protector from a strip

	On the package	What it means
The name	Surge protector	Real protection
A rating	Joules	Soaks up surges
A light	Protected	Shows it works
A mark	UL listed	Safety-tested
If missing	Just a strip	No protection

No 'surge protector' and no joules? Treat it as a plain strip.



Need a Real Person?

You do not have to remember all of it.
You just have to remember you can call.
Friendly, in-home tech help -- I come to you.

BILL'S PROMISE

If you are not 100% happy with a visit, I will
make it right -- or refund it. No awkwardness,
no fine print. That is how I would want to be treated.

(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com

Bill@BillsHomeTech.com · Mon–Sat 9:00 AM – 7:30 PM

— Bill

Prefer help without a visit?

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*



Book a visit —
billshometech.com/book

Use of these guides is subject to our Terms of Use (billshometech.com/terms-of-use).

(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com

Bill@BillsHomeTech.com · Mon–Sat 9:00 AM – 7:30 PM

For general information only — not professional advice. Use at your own risk. For electrical, gas, water, or ladder work, please call a licensed professional. — Bill's Home Tech