



An Extended Guide · No. 1751

When to Replace a Surge Protector

They wear out — here's how to know

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! 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 guide is about knowing when a surge protector has done its duty and needs replacing — something you can handle yourself for the plug-in kind, while your electrician keeps an eye on the whole-home unit at your panel.

Surge protectors wear out — and that's perfectly normal

Here's something almost nobody is told at the store: a surge protector does not last forever. It's built to spend itself protecting your electronics, a little at a time. Knowing when it's used up is the whole trick — and it's an easy one to learn.

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, I've found this is one of the most misunderstood things about surge protection. Most people never replace a protector at all, because it never looks broken.

So let's clear it up together, plainly and without any pressure. By the end you'll know exactly what to watch for, when to swap one out, and why doing so is one of the cheapest, smartest little habits in the whole house.

★ No such thing as a silly question

If any of this leaves you unsure whether a protector of yours is still good, just ask. 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 already be ahead of almost everyone on this.

- ❑ A surge protector is sacrificial — it spends itself soaking up surges, a little at a time, until it can no longer protect.
- ❑ Here's the catch that fools everyone: a used-up protector still powers your devices, so folks trust dead protection for years.
- ❑ Replace it after any big surge or a nearby lightning strike — one large hit can use it up all at once.
- ❑ Replace it if the 'protected' indicator light goes out or changes, even though everything plugged in still turns on.
- ❑ Replace it right away if it's damaged, discolored, hot, or smells burnt — that last one is a safety matter, not a someday.
- ❑ Replace it every few years as a matter of course. When in doubt, swap it — the protector is the cheap part of the whole equation.

✓ One idea to hold onto

A working outlet is not the same as working protection. The outlets outlive the protection inside — which is exactly why a dead protector can fool you for years.

What 'sacrificial' really means

It sounds dramatic, but it's the kindest thing a surge protector does: it takes the hit so your electronics don't have to.

Inside a real surge protector are small parts whose only job is to grab extra voltage and shove it safely aside, away from whatever's plugged in. Every time they do that, they give up a little of themselves. That's the deal — they wear out on purpose, so your television doesn't.

Picture the tread on a tire, or a bar of soap by the sink. A bit wears away with each use. A big surge scrubs off a lot at once; the small, everyday ones wear it down slowly. Either way, there comes a day when there's simply nothing left to give.

✓ Think of a sponge for surges

A protector is like a sponge for surge energy: it can soak up only so much over its life, and then it's full. A bigger 'sponge' lasts longer, but every sponge fills up eventually.

The trap that fools almost everyone

This is the single most important page in the guide, so I want it to really land.

When a surge protector's protective parts are all used up, the outlets on it keep right on working. Your lamp lights, your TV comes on, everything looks perfectly normal. Nothing about it says 'I've stopped protecting you.'

So people do the natural thing — they assume it's still guarding their gear, and they go on trusting a protector that quietly quit months, even years, ago. The power is obvious; the protection is invisible. That gap is where the trouble hides.

! Working outlets are not working protection

Please don't judge a surge protector by whether things still turn on. They always will. The only honest way to know is the indicator light, the calendar, and your own eyes and nose — which is what the rest of this guide is about.

Replace it after a big surge or a close strike

Sometimes a protector's whole life ends in a single instant — and that's it doing its job.

One large surge, from a nearby lightning strike or a serious grid event, can use up a protector's entire capacity in a flash. It may have worked flawlessly and saved everything plugged into it — and still be completely finished afterward. A good death, you might say, but a death all the same.

So any time you've had a real event — lightning close by, a hard flicker, the power dropping out and slamming back on — treat your protectors as suspect. Check their lights and give them a look. When in doubt after a big storm, replace them.

✓ Make it part of your storm cleanup

After a rough storm, right when you're resetting the blinking clocks, walk the house and glance at each protector's light too. It takes two minutes and catches the ones that gave their all.

Let the little light tell you

Most protectors have a built-in way of telling you they're still on the job. It pays to learn to read it.

Look for a small indicator light, often labeled 'protected.' While it's lit, the protective parts inside are still working. If it goes dark, or changes color, while the strip itself still has power, that's the protector telling you plainly that its protection is spent.

Not every protector has a light, and some warn you with a beep instead, so a light isn't the only signal to know about. Our companion guide, on reading the indicator light, walks through every kind — what 'protected' and 'grounded' lights mean, and what to do when one goes out.

✓ Put the light where you can see it

There's no point in a warning light you never look at. Set the protector so its light faces out into the room, not hidden behind the couch, and a quick glance now and then does the whole job.

Trust your eyes, your ears, and your nose

Some warning signs need no light at all — just your own good senses, which are better instruments than you think.

If a protector looks scorched or discolored, feels warm or hot to the touch, buzzes or crackles, or has a melted or bubbled spot, stop using it. Those are not quirks to live with; they're a device telling you it's in distress.

And the most important one of all is a smell. If you ever notice a burnt or sharp electrical odor coming from a protector, an outlet, or anything plugged in, act on it right away. That's your home speaking up.

! A burnt smell means stop — don't use it

If you smell burning or something electrical, unplug the protector if you can reach it safely, do not use it again, and call a licensed electrician. A scorch mark or an electrical smell is never a wait-and-see moment.

Replace them on a schedule, too

Even a protector that never takes a dramatic hit is quietly wearing down the whole time. Age alone is a reason to replace.

Remember, most surges are the small, everyday kind that start right inside your own home, from appliances cycling on and off. (Our guide on surges from inside your home tells that surprising story.) Those little spikes nibble away at a protector day and night, so it ages even in a house that never sees a storm.

So plan to retire your plug-in protectors every few years as a matter of course. If the package or manual names a lifespan, follow the maker's guidance. If it doesn't, a few years is a sensible, safe rule of thumb — and cheap insurance.

✓ Write the date on the bottom

When you buy a protector, jot the month and year on its underside with a marker. Then its age is never a mystery — you just tip it up and read it, no receipts to dig through.

The whole-home unit wears out too

The big protector at your electrical panel is sacrificial in exactly the same way — but who checks it is different.

A whole-home protector spends itself soaking up the big surges before they spread into your house, and a large hit or long years of service can use it up just like a plug-in one. It has its own indicator that your electrician can show you where to find.

The difference is that it lives inside a live panel, so checking and replacing it is a licensed electrician's job — never a do-it-yourself one. Glance at its indicator after a rough storm season, and if it's changed, call your pro. Our whole-home surge protection guide covers all of this.

! Leave the panel to the electrician

Never open your electrical panel to inspect or swap a whole-home unit yourself. The wires in there stay live even with the main breaker off. That check is the one part of this guide that isn't a DIY job — and it isn't something I do myself, either.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

How often you'll be replacing protectors depends a good deal on where you live, because some homes simply see more surges than others.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town and the suburbs, shorter and often-buried power lines mean somewhat fewer of the big, sudden surges, so your plug-in protectors may live closer to the top of their expected years. You'll still replace them on a schedule and after any real event.

- Fewer nearby-lightning hits usually means fewer sudden, life-shortening surges to a protector.
- The everyday spikes from your own appliances still wear protectors down — so replace on a schedule regardless.
- City water keeps flowing in an outage, so it's mostly your electronics you're watching over.
- After a hard grid flicker or a restoration jolt, still take a moment to check your protectors' lights.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, long overhead lines and fiercer, less-obstructed storms send more surges your way — so your protectors may reach the end of their lives sooner, and you'll want to check them more often.

- More nearby-lightning exposure can use a protector up faster, or finish it in a single hard hit.
- Longer, more frequent outages bring more of those power-restoration jolts, each one a little wear.
- A 240-volt well pump and other hardwired gear lean on the whole-home unit — have the electrician check its indicator too.
- After a bad storm, make the rounds and replace any protector whose light has gone dark or changed.

★ Not sure how your home behaves?

Tell me where you are and how your power acts up in a storm, and I'll help you settle on a sensible replace-it rhythm — no pressure, no sales pitch. Call (330) 200-8042.

Keep the receipt — it ties to the warranty

A replaced protector and a saved receipt go hand in hand, for a reason worth knowing.

Many protectors carry a warranty on the unit itself, and some also advertise a connected-equipment guarantee — a promise to help pay for gear damaged by a surge that got through a properly used protector. Nearly all of these ask for proof of purchase, so tuck the receipt away when you buy.

I'll be honest with you: those guarantees come with conditions and can be a real hassle to claim, so treat one as a nice backstop, not the reason to buy. Our guide on connected-equipment warranties gives you the straight story. But a kept receipt costs you nothing and keeps the door open.

✓ One little folder

Keep a single envelope or folder for protector receipts and manuals, right with your other home papers. If you ever need to make a claim, everything's in one place instead of scattered to the winds.

When in doubt, just replace it

Here's the freeing part of this whole subject, and I save it for when you might be fretting over a close call.

A plug-in surge protector is the cheap part of the equation — far less than the television, the computer, or the appliance it's guarding. So you never have to agonize over whether an old one might have a little life left in it. The math is lopsided in your favor.

If you're unsure, replace it. The peace of mind is worth more than the small cost, and you'll never lie awake wondering whether you're trusting a protector that quietly gave up the ghost. Certainty is cheap here — so buy it.

★ I'll give you a straight answer

If you'd rather not guess, hold the thing up on a video call and I'll tell you what I see. For simple questions like this I can often help right over a screen-share for \$49. Call or text (330) 200-8042.

Swapping one out, step by step

Replacing a plug-in protector is a job you can absolutely do yourself. Here's the gentle version, in order.

- ❑ Turn off and unplug the devices connected to the old protector, then unplug the protector itself from the wall.
- ❑ Plug the new protector straight into a properly grounded three-prong wall outlet — not into an extension cord.
- ❑ Never daisy-chain — don't plug the new protector into another strip or protector; it's a fire risk and undoes the protection.
- ❑ Plug your devices into the new protector, and set it where you can see its indicator light from across the room.
- ❑ Confirm the 'protected' light — and a 'grounded' light, if it has one — is lit before you trust it with anything.

! The two don'ts, every time

Two quick rules that matter: never daisy-chain one strip into another, and never use a 3-to-2-prong 'cheater' adapter to force a protector into an ungrounded outlet. Both quietly defeat the very protection you just paid for. Our grounding guide explains why.

What to do with the old one

Retiring a protector properly is the last little step, and it keeps a dead one from fooling anybody down the road.

Please don't just move a tired protector to a 'less important' outlet and keep trusting it. A used-up protector is used up everywhere — it protects the lamp no better than it protected the TV. If you truly understand it's now only a plain power strip, it's safe to reuse as one, but honestly it's cleaner to retire it.

A surge protector is electronics, so it belongs with your electronic recycling, not the regular trash. Many towns have an e-waste drop-off or a collection day. If you're not sure where yours is, I'm happy to point you to a local spot.

✓ Label it so no one's fooled

If you do keep an old one around as a plain strip, write 'NO SURGE PROTECTION' right on it with a marker. That way nobody in the house plugs the good computer into it a year from now, thinking it's safe.

The signs, at a glance

Here's the whole story in one quick table you can come back to any time you're wondering.

What you notice	What it likely means	What to do
Light out, still has power	Protection is spent	Replace it
Light changed color	Protection is failing	Replace it
Took a big surge or strike	May be used up	Check, then replace
Warm, buzzing, discolored	Failing or unsafe	Replace it
Burnt or electrical smell	A safety problem	Stop — call a pro
Just several years old	Worn from everyday use	Replace on schedule

✓ **Notice the last column**

Almost every row ends the same way: replace it. That's the theme of the whole guide. Replacing is normal upkeep, not a sign anything went wrong.

Common mistakes people make

Knowing the usual slip-ups ahead of time is half the battle. Here are the ones worth stepping around.

- **Trusting it because things still turn on.** The outlets always work; that tells you nothing about the protection.
- **Never once checking the indicator light** — so a protector that quit years ago sits there looking fine.
- **Keeping a protector that took a direct storm hit**, assuming it's good because your gear survived. It may be spent.
- **Demoting an old one to another room** and still counting on it. Used up is used up, wherever you plug it in.
- **Ignoring a burnt smell or a warm spot** and hoping it passes. That one is a safety matter, not a someday.

! The most expensive mistake

The costliest slip of all is the quiet one: trusting dead protection for years, then losing a pricey device to a surge the protector could no longer stop. A few dollars and a glance now and then prevents it.

A few myths, cleared up

Replacing protectors attracts some tall tales. Here are the ones I hear most, set straight.

Q: 'If it still powers my stuff, it's still protecting it.'

No — and this is the big one. The outlets keep working long after the protection inside is used up. Working power and working protection are two different things.

Q: 'Surge protectors last forever.'

They don't. They're sacrificial by design, wearing down with every surge and with age. Every one of them has a working life, then it's done.

Q: 'A more expensive one never needs replacing.'

A bigger, better protector generally lasts longer — but it still wears out. There's no such thing as a permanent one, at any price.

Q: 'I'd know if mine stopped working.'

Usually not, unless you look. That's the whole trap. The light, the calendar, and your senses are how you know — not whether your lamp still comes on.

✓ Each myth has a home

If one of these surprised you, good — that's the point. Our guides on the indicator light and on surge protector versus plain power strip clear up the neighboring confusions too.

Make it a gentle yearly rhythm

You don't have to remember any of this on your own. The trick is to tie it to something you already do.

Once a year — say, when the clocks change, or at the start of storm season — take a slow lap around the house. Glance at each protector's light, tip a few up to read the date you wrote on the bottom, and note which ones are getting on in years. It's a ten-minute walk, once a year.

Anything with a dark or changed light, anything that took a big storm hit, and anything simply too old goes on a little 'replace' list. Then you pick them up on your next errand. Calm, cheap, and done — no fretting in between.

✓ Pair it with the smoke alarms

Lots of folks already check smoke-alarm batteries twice a year. Fold the protector glance into that same lap and it never becomes one more thing to remember.

A quick self-check you can run today

Want to know where you stand right now? Walk through this short list at your own pace.

- ☐ I've found the indicator light on each surge protector and confirmed it's lit.
- ☐ I've replaced any protector whose light is out or has changed color.
- ☐ I've replaced any that took a big surge or a close lightning strike.
- ☐ I've checked each one for warmth, discoloration, buzzing, or any burnt smell.
- ☐ I know roughly how old each protector is, and I've flagged the ones due for age.
- ☐ I've asked my electrician to glance at the whole-home unit's indicator, if I have one.

★ Want a hand running through it?

I'm glad to walk your home with you and check every protector together, set up any replacements, and flag the panel unit for your electrician. Call or text (330) 200-8042 and we'll make quick work of it.

How I can help

This is exactly the sort of small, practical thing I love to take off your plate.

I can walk your home with you, find and read every protector's indicator light, and tell you honestly which ones are still doing their job and which have quietly retired. Where one's due, I'll set up a good replacement on the spot, cords tidied so nothing's a trip hazard, and show you where to watch the light.

For the whole-home unit at your panel, I don't do the electrical work myself — that's a licensed electrician's job. But I'll help you understand when it needs a look and line you up with a trustworthy local pro, so you never have to navigate that part alone.

★ Real help, close to home

A first in-home visit is a flat \$99, and for simple checks I can often help over 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 about replacing surge protectors, answered plainly.

Q: How often should I replace a surge protector?

Every few years as a matter of course, plus any time it takes a big surge, its light goes out or changes, or it looks or smells wrong. If the maker gives a lifespan, follow that; if not, a few years is a safe rule of thumb.

Q: It still powers everything — do I really need a new one?

Possibly, yes. The outlets keep working long after the protection is used up, so 'it still turns things on' doesn't tell you it's still protecting them. Check the light and the age instead.

Q: A big storm just passed. Should I replace mine?

Check them first. One large surge can use a protector up all at once, even while saving your gear. If a light is out or changed, or you're unsure, replace it — it's the cheap part.

Q: Does the whole-home protector need replacing too?

Yes, it's sacrificial the same way, but checking or replacing it is a licensed electrician's job at the panel, never a DIY one. Glance at its indicator after big storms and call your pro if it's changed.

★ 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 silly question about any of 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 when to replace a surge protector 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

How a Protector Wears Out

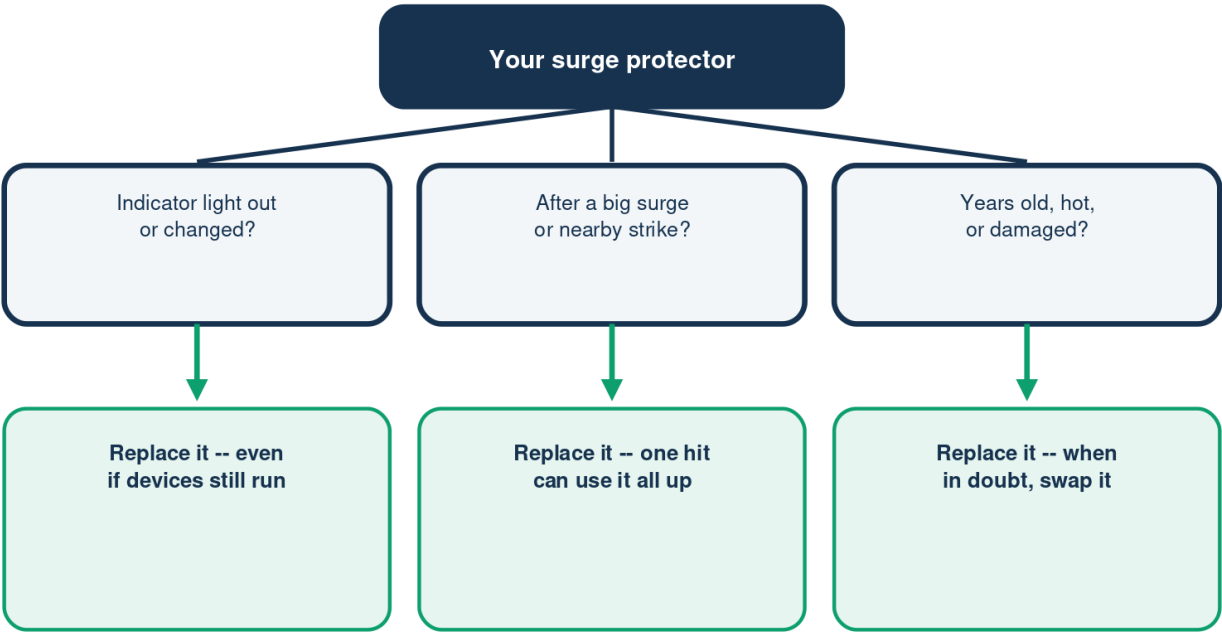
It spends itself so your gear doesn't



The outlets outlive the protection -- that's the trap to watch for.

When Should I Replace It?

Any one 'yes' means it's time



A used-up protector still powers your devices -- that's the trap.

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

Powers vs. Protects

Why a dead protector fools you

	Powers devices?	Still protects?
Brand new	Yes	Yes
After a big hit	Yes	Maybe not
Light gone out	Yes	No
Years old	Yes	Probably not

It keeps powering your gear long after it stops protecting it.

Signs It's Time

What to do about each one

What to do	
Light off	Replace it
Burnt smell	Stop -- call a pro
Big storm hit	Check or replace
Every few years	Replace it

When in doubt, replace it -- the protector is the cheap part.



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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.

— *Bill*



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