Appliance Tips

Here are some useful appliance operating or maintenance tips that may surprise homeowners. Appliance repair is discussed in separate topics.

More tips to come!

General

•***Put a surge protector at every expensive appliance.*** If you have old-school manual timer dials on your appliance or if it has no fancy controls or displays, your machine is fairly immune to power surges. Newer, modern appliances have sophisticated electronic control boards. These are usually sensitive to disturbances in the electric power supply. Appliance failures are often due to power surges which kill control boards with parts cost alone over $100. In this case, spend $15-20 on a decent appliance surge protector and your fancy new dishwasher, refrigerator, oven, washer or dryer is likely to survive the next thunderstorm.

It's not a bad idea to put a surge protector on your garage door opener, either. Some manufacturers are even building them into the openers now.

Fancy electric dryers are a special case because there are no plug-in surge protectors for this. However, you can have a whole-house surge protector installed which provides some protection from external power surges, including your computer-controlled electric dryer.

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Dishwasher

•***Run kitchen faucet until water is hot just before starting the dishwasher.*** Dishwashers depend entirely on hot water for cleaning performance. The dishwasher almost always has its water supply tapped in below the sink, so running the faucet until hot will ensure that the important first wash cycle runs with hot water.

•***Dishwasher seem to be dead?*** Before you call for appliance repair, check to see if power is switched off to the dishwasher. Many homes have an ordinary light switch installed on the kitchen counter which controls power to the dishwasher. Often located near the garbage disposer switch, the dishwasher switch may unintentionally have been bumped off.

•***Avoid liquid detergent.*** While quite popular now, liquid dishwasher detergents really tend to gum up the inner workings of most dishwashers. Appliance service people deal with this a lot and most recommend against liquid detergent. If you really prefer liquids, use the smallest amount that provides good cleaning, especially with HE machines.

•***Use HE or less detergent for HE machines.*** High efficiency (HE) dishwashers, which became commonplace in 2007 or so, are designed to use less water and less heating energy. The old formulation of detergent does not dissolve as well in the lower volume of water used in HE machines and may leave residue after washing. While hard to find, HE detergent is best for HE dishwashers. An alternative is to use far less (⅓ to ½) than you would use for an older standard dishwasher.

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Clothes Washer

•***Avoid overloading the machine.*** Tackle that huge pile of clothes in two loads instead of trying to get it done with one. The extra load on the motor and transmission is very hard on washing machines. Some brands deliberately use a break-away coupling to protect the transmission from overload. This may save a super-expensive repair, but it makes for more frequent coupling replacements. Neither is convenient, so don't risk it by stuffing the washer full.

•***Check your water hoses periodically.*** Washer hose failures are a major cause of water damage in a home. The typical hose has a 10yr lifetime and may not last that long. If a hose leaks you may not realize it for hours, long after water has begun to damage your home. The easiest remedy is to use metal braided hoses which are unlikely to burst and leak. You may also want to invest in an inexpensive water leak detector alarm unit. These only work where someone is around to hear the alarm.

•***Use extra caution when moving front-load washers.*** The internal mechanism of a front loader is much more delicate than a traditional top-loader and the innards can easily be damaged if tilted or jostled around. If you need to move your front loader, re-install the shipping bolts to restrain the mechanism.

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Clothes Dryer

•***Clean your lint screen with each load.*** Dryer efficiency is directly related to air flow so any lint in the screen causes the dryer to run longer to dry the clothes.

•***Clean out your lint screen cavity regularly.*** Periodically you should use a special brush or vacuum attachment to clear lint out of the lint screen cavity. This minimizes lint buildup inside the machine near ignition sources which can lead to fires.

•***Avoid fabric softener sheets in the dryer.*** These sheets leave residue which gums up the air flow path and attracts lint. See important safety topic, Dryer Vent Cleaning.

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Refrigerator/Freezer

•***Clean refrigerator condenser coils regularly.*** Your refrigerator will use less electricity and last longer when heat exchange is kept efficient with clean coils.

•***Lubricate your door seals.*** Once a year it is recommended that you wipe the fridge (and freezer) door seals with a damp cloth. After drying, apply a thin film of petroleum jelly to the hinge side seals. Only the hinge side needs lube because it is the part of the seal that moves against the cabinet. Lubrication allows the seal to move freely and prevents twisting and tearing of the seal, a common problem. Many modern refrigerators and freezers have the seals glued on, which makes replacement harder and more expensive, so this is an easy way to preserve your seals and avoid the hassle of replacment.

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Garbage Disposal

•***Avoid putting fiber in the food waste disposer.*** High fiber is good for your digestive system, but not for your garbage disposal; it tends to jam the blades and get caught in the drain pipes. This would preclude artichokes, corn husks, celery and such fibrous items.

•***Run cold water when operating the garbage disposal.*** You may have heard that hot water is better but this allows fat to solidify downstream where it may block the drain.

•***Run water for 30sec after switching off the motor.*** This helps push shredded waste to the larger drain pipe where a clog is less likely.

•***Unjam a stuck disposal the quick way.*** Food waste disposers come with a ¼" hex tool to unjam a stuck mechanism. The bottom center of the disposal has an exposed hex socket which provides a way for a wrench to rotate the mechanism. Simply insert the tool into the socket and twist until it spins freely. If you have lost your original wrench, they can be purchased wherever disposers are sold, or use a standard ¼" hex bit.

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Microwave Oven

•***Never run a microwave oven empty.*** With nothing inside to heat up, all the power is reflected back to the microwave generator. This is a good way to damage (reduced power) or destroy the magnetron.

•***Don't slam the door shut.*** Microwave ovens employ two-stage door interlocks to prevent energy from being produced if the door is not reliably closed. These interlock switches are plastic and break easily. They are a common repair item, so be gentle with the door latch.

•***Use a turntable for improved heating uniformity.*** Rotating the food while heating minimizes hot spots and reduces cook time. Some microwaves come with built-in turntables. If yours doesn't, they can be purchased as an accessory.

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Vacuum Cleaner

•***Periodically remove hair from the beater brush.*** Vacuum cleaners with beater bars (rotating brush) are great for getting dirt out of carpet but they are also great at getting tangled with hair. Unless you're a single guy with a crew cut, much of the debris picked up by your vacuum is hair. The longer it is, the more likely it will wrap around the beater bar instead of getting sucked into the canister. Cutting and pulling this hair out may unjam a stuck beater bar and improve the effectiveness of the brush.