

Electric Outages: Frequently Asked Questions

What are the most common causes of power outages?

Although we are committed to providing you with the most reliable service possible, events that are beyond our control sometimes occur. Everything from weather, animals and emergencies can trigger a power outage. Some outages are planned in advance when crews need to perform upgrades and repairs.

Car accidents, lightning, high winds, winter storms—whatever the cause, we do our best to restore power as quickly as possible.

Why do my neighbors sometimes have power during an outage when I don't?

Many factors can cause this situation. Your neighbors may be on a different circuit or “supply line,” or there may be trouble just on the portion supplying your immediate area. The cause of the outage may be isolated to one transformer or a group of transformers, or the problem may affect only the power lines connecting to your residence.

What if I only have electricity in part of my house?

Power comes into your house through service lines connected to a piece of electrical equipment called the service panel. From your home's service panel, electricity is routed through individual circuits to different parts of the house. Each circuit is protected by a circuit breaker or fuse. When you have power in some circuits but not others, the first thing you should check is whether a circuit breaker has tripped or a fuse is blown.

If your breakers or fuses are okay, there may be another cause. Most houses are supplied with electricity through service lines that consist of three service wires. If one of the wires breaks or becomes damaged, you may have power in some circuits, but not others. Heavy-duty electric appliances such as air conditioners, hot water heaters, clothes dryers, or ranges may not operate. In these cases, you will need to contact AEC.

Why can't you tell me exactly when my power will be restored?

Several factors are involved in service restoration that affect our ability to predict when restoration will occur. When a crew arrives to make repairs, the cause of the outage must be investigated. The crew may encounter complex problems that require additional time, equipment or crews. Field crews provide status updates on restoration efforts while on site.

Widespread damage from Winter weather or a severe storm make it impossible to accurately predict when a particular customer's power will be restored—especially in the early phases of an outage when the extent of the damage is being assessed. Once the extent of damage is understood, restoration times are affected by the degree of damage to our facilities. High-voltage transmission lines must be given first priority because they supply electricity to the entire distribution system. Substations are repaired next in order to energize local distribution lines. A distribution line serving a local area may have multiple damage locations, all of which must be found and repaired. All these factors affect our ability to predict when a specific customer's power will be restored.

Why did my power come back on, then go off again a few minutes later?

Restoring power to your home is a complex and dangerous job. Sometimes, after a line is repaired in one location, other damage causes the line to go out again. At other times, it may be necessary to turn off your power once more to safely repair other problems. In any case, our crews work diligently to restore your power as soon as safely possible. If your power comes back on, then goes off again, please contact us again.

If power goes out, do I need to throw out all the food in my refrigerator and freezer?

Try to leave the refrigerator or freezer doors closed during a power outage. If the doors remain closed, refrigerated food can stay cool for about six to nine hours. Frozen food can remain safe for up to 24 hours.

What are the priorities for service restoration?

First, we will work around the clock until service is restored, though daylight hours are needed for most activities. Safety of personnel and the public is our highest priority. The priorities are:

- Assessing the overall system and repairing delivery points, major transmission lines and substations that carry power from electric facilities to communities.
- Restoring power to key services, essential to community safety, health and welfare—such as hospitals, police, fire, communications, water, and sanitation are the greatest priority.
- Making repairs to electrical facilities that will return service to the largest number of members in the shortest period of time, then the next largest number and so on until power is returned to everyone, is our goal.
- We begin this process by repairing our main distribution lines first. Distribution lines carry power from substations to large portions of our service area. Next, we focus on secondary lines that serve electricity to neighborhoods and other smaller groups of members. Finally, we repair individual transformers or service lines connected to individual homes.

Why at times does it seem to take so long to restore my power?

When damage is widespread—such as after a severe storm—it may be impossible to restore electric service to everyone at the same time. In such cases, we give priority to hospitals, police and fire departments, water systems, and communication facilities. After that, we make repairs based on restoring power to the greatest number of customers in the shortest amount of time. Sometimes your circuit may be among the first repaired and other times it may take longer. When there is a delay in restoring your power, we appreciate your patience.

Why did a service truck go through my neighborhood without stopping to restore my power?

Our service crews must first tackle damage assessment of lines, equipment and public safety hazards before making repairs. A truck may have passed your home on the way to investigate damage on down the line. Rest assured, our crews are working on power restoration for you as rapidly as possible.

When should I call?

Once your neighbors (subdivision, street or next door) have electric service restored, please check your breakers or fuses to make sure they are operational. If you're still without power, please call us. Have your account number or phone number available when you call to report your outage and we will record your information and ensure a report is generated to have your service restored.

Directly after a storm, we will know if large power lines have been damaged and you are without power. So rather than call us right away, please help us keep the phone lines open. If you need to report an emergency like a downed power line or electrical equipment that is sparking and dangerous, please call immediately.

How does AEC provide for people with special medical problems, such as those on life-sustaining medical equipment?

Any customer who has electrically operated medical equipment in their home that is necessary to sustain life or avoid serious medical complications should have an energy source backup. Members may notify AEC of this situation (providing written orders from a medical professional) and we will identify the particular service as such. In the event of a planned outage, AEC will make notification attempts to the individual member. For outages beyond our control, we will work diligently to restore electric service as soon as possible.

Does AEC pay for damage to appliances, electronic equipment or other personal property damaged in a power loss or during power restoration?

We do not reimburse for damages to household equipment or personal property caused by storms or other acts of nature. Please contact your insurance company in such instances. Similarly, we do not reimburse for damage resulting from car accidents or other emergency conditions that require us to temporarily turn off power.

If you are experiencing dim or flickering lights, please call us. AEC will dispatch crews to inspect the electric service to the metering point. In some cases, you may need to have your home electrical system checked by a certified electrical contractor. Until the problem is resolved, it's a good idea to take precautions such as unplugging or limiting use of electronically sensitive or nonessential appliances.

Does AEC allow generators to be used by members?

Yes; however, all generators (connected in any way to the service panel) must be equipped with a transfer switch to prevent back feed onto the line and potential exposure to our crews. For more information, contact our Member Services Department or the TN State Electrical Inspector.

1. Protect public safety.

Crews clear live power lines and repair equipment that poses a public safety hazard. To stay on the safe side, AEC responds to all downed line inquiries even if they may be telephone wires or television cables. In addition, AEC also prioritizes public health and safety facilities such as hospitals, clinics and utilities (water, sewer, natural gas and telephone).

2. Restoration begins; generation facilities checked.

The initial step checks the power source, typically a TVA delivery point that may meet the needs of thousands of members. If these facilities are damaged or knocked out, repairs are critical to restoring the system.

3. Repair transmission lines.

Transmission lines are the superhighways of our system, moving electricity from delivery points to the substations that further distribute power. Because transmission lines serve large numbers of members, they are also one of AEC's highest priorities, and crews begin working on these lines immediately.

4. Repair substations.

Substations are the next critical link in the chain. They receive power from high-voltage transmission lines and reduce the voltage for residential and business consumption. Substations act as a distribution and switching system.

5. Repair feeder lines.

Feeder lines are like arterial streets, running from a substation to neighborhood networks, typically serving hundreds of members. These usually are the lines affected when you hear news reports about an outage.

6. Repair tap lines.

Tap lines move power from the feeder lines down individual streets and roads. Generally, there are 20-30 homes served by one tap line, with fewer homes in isolated or rural areas. Members may see a crew assess the damage and drive away without immediately restoring power. This happens when the work requires further investigation, more equipment or additional crew members because of extensive damage, or because of an urgent call elsewhere. A crew will return to make the repair.

7. Connect individual members whose power is out.

This is the most difficult and time-consuming step. Individual AEC crews must visit individual homeowner's property in order to repair lines to a single dwelling. These repairs are often in isolated areas where homes are far apart or places where downed trees obstruct crews from working.