

Lights and switches

Some lighting might have been provided by light fixtures that were operated by outlets connected to wall switches. The function of some wall switches might not have been determined due to furnishings, missing or burned out light bulbs, switched wall outlets that were blocked by furnishings or storage, or other specific conditions present at the time of the property inspection.

Dimmer light switches sometimes become warm to the touch, especially at the dimmest settings. While the condition is common, particularly with older dimmer switches, it can also indicate other electrical problems, such as a dimmer switch installed by a homeowner on a light fixture that draws too much electricity.

Determining whether or not a dimmer switch is properly matched to the lighting fixture being dimmed is beyond the scope of the home inspection. If the dimmer switch installation instructions are available, check the maximum wattage for the dimmer switch and then note the wattage for the light bulb that is installed. Make sure that the light bulb wattage is not more than the maximum wattage for the dimmer switch. If it is, change to a lower-wattage light bulb. If you have any concerns, or if you notice flickering or brownouts at dimmed lighting fixtures (or any other lighting fixtures, for that matter), consult with a licensed electrician immediately.

Some manufacturers require a certain amount of clearance in the attic around their recessed lighting fixtures for proper ventilation and operation. Inadequate clearance can create a fire hazard due to overheating of the light fixture. A good indication of overheating is flickering and brownouts at recessed lighting fixtures, although other causes or multiple causes are possible. Clearance requirements typically are located on a paper plate attached to the fixture or in the manufacturer's installation instructions. When homes are built or remodeled, the electrical fixtures are installed before the attic insulation. Too often the insulation installers don't understand how their work can have a detrimental effect on the electrical items that are already in place, possibly causing a fire due to overheating or damaged electrical wires.

I look for recessed lighting fixtures and note any lack of clearance; I do not read paper plates or installation instructions to determine what type of clearance or how much clearance is required by specific brands of recessed lights simply because different fixtures could have different requirements, and all of the lighting fixtures usually are not accessible when in the attic. If your property inspection report indicates inadequate clearance around recessed lights, that means that I saw at least one recessed lighting fixture in the attic; there could be more. So have the condition evaluated further by qualified lighting or electrical personnel, or by the manufacturer's representative.

If you are unsure of the manufacturer's clearance requirements, try to get any installation instructions from the seller, or visit the manufacturer's web site to see if they have instructions you can download. If all else fails, simply make sure that there is clearance around the lighting fixtures in the attic to help prevent overheating. If anyone has to get into the attic for any reason, have the attic inspected immediately afterwards to ensure that no damage has been caused. I quite often find that someone working in an attic has damaged a lighting fixture or moved insulation around, unknowingly stacking it on top of lighting fixtures, to make it easier for them to work.

