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The facts and consequences of electric shock accidents

It's a fact: In Québec, more than 50 per cent of all accidents wherein electricity is a causal factor happen to the general public.

It is impossible to foresee the consequences of these accidents. Sometimes, an electric accident will leave a tingling feeling in a limb; sometimes, the result is death. Never forget, appearances can be deceiving: even a low intensity current can cause major damage!

Here are the four factors that apply to all electric accidents:

- Duration of the contact— It's a fact: Depending on the length of time that contact is maintained, the heat produced by an electric current can reach up to 2,000C. It has been observed that the duration of the contact is directly related to the severity of the accident. The reason for this is quite simple: As an electric current flows through the body, it triggers a contraction of muscles such that the victim cannot relax them. As a result, the victim can suffer serious consequences after only a fraction of a second.

- The pathway through the body chosen by the current— It's a fact: An 80-milliampere current passing through the heart is enough to cause heart stoppage. This is a life and death situation, and is of the utmost importance. Because the heart and brain are vital organs, an electric current passing

through either one of them will probably be fatal. If the current affects only a foot, leg, hand or arm, the consequences will be less devastating, but may nevertheless lead to amputation of the member.

- Resistance— It's a fact: Metals and water do not have the capability of resisting an electric current. This means that they are incapable of slowing or stopping the flow of electricity. In an electric accident, this lack of resistance can have decisive consequences.

The consequences of an electric accident can be greatly reduced, as a function of the resistance level. For example, a person working in a dry environment, having no contact with a metallic surface, will present a higher level of resistance to an electric current.

- The intensity of the current— It's a fact: if only one tenth of the current flowing through a 100-watt light bulb passes through the heart for more than one second, the accident can be fatal. The intensity of the current can therefore constitute a major element in the seriousness of the episode. Even though contact with a 120-volt electric circuit may have no repercussions on a person's body, one must always bear in mind the potential consequences of an electric current.

—News Canada

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