

5.1: Prelude to Chemical Bonds

Diamond is the hardest natural material known on Earth. Yet diamond is just pure carbon. What is special about this element that makes diamond so hard? Bonds. Chemical bonds.

In a perfect diamond crystal, each C atom makes four connections—bonds—to four other C atoms in a three-dimensional matrix. Four is the greatest number of bonds that is commonly made by atoms, so C atoms maximize their interactions with other atoms. This three-dimensional array of connections extends throughout the diamond crystal, making it essentially one large molecule. Breaking a diamond means breaking every bond at once. Also, the bonds are moderately strong. There are stronger interactions known, but the carbon-carbon connection is fairly strong itself. Not only does a person have to break many connections at once, but the bonds are also strong connections from the start.



Diamond is the hardest known natural substance and is composed solely of the element carbon. (CC SA-BY 3.0; Mario Sarto).

There are other substances that have bonding arrangements similar to diamond. Silicon dioxide and boron nitride have some similarities, but neither of them comes close to the ultimate hardness of diamond.

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