

6.6.2.1: Automobile Emissions

Learning Objective

- Identify the different pollutant gases in automobile emissions.

Exhaust gas or flue gas is emitted as a result of the combustion of fuels such as natural gas, gasoline, petrol, biodiesel blends, diesel fuel, fuel oil, or coal. It is a major component of motor vehicle emissions (and from stationary internal combustion engines), which can also include:

- Crankcase blow-by
- Evaporation of unused gasoline

Motor vehicle emissions contribute to air pollution and are a major ingredient in the creation of smog in some large cities. A 2013 study by MIT indicates that 53,000 early deaths occur per year in the United States alone because of vehicle emissions.

Carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides are the two main pollutant gases from automobile emissions. Ozone is a result of the reaction between nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds (VOCs).

Carbon Monoxide

Carbon Monoxide (CO) is a colorless, odorless gas that can be harmful when inhaled in large amounts. CO is released when something is burned. The greatest sources of CO to outdoor air are cars, trucks and other vehicles or machinery that burn fossil fuels. A variety of items in your home such as unvented kerosene and gas space heaters, leaking chimneys and furnaces, and gas stoves also release CO and can affect air quality indoors.

Harmful effects

Breathing air with a high concentration of CO reduces the amount of oxygen that can be transported in the blood stream to critical organs like the heart and brain.

At very high levels, which are possible indoors or in other enclosed environments, CO can cause dizziness, confusion, unconsciousness and death.

Very high levels of CO are not likely to occur outdoors. However, when CO levels are elevated outdoors, they can be of particular concern for people with some types of heart disease. These people already have a reduced ability for getting oxygenated blood to their hearts in situations where the heart needs more oxygen than usual. They are especially vulnerable to the effects of CO when exercising or under increased stress. In these situations, short-term exposure to elevated CO may result in reduced oxygen to the heart accompanied by chest pain also known as angina.

Nitrogen Oxides

Nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) is one of a group of highly reactive gasses known as "oxides of nitrogen," or "nitrogen oxides (NO_x). Other nitrogen oxides include nitrous acid and nitric acid. NO₂ is a yellowish-brown to reddish-brown foul-smelling gas that is a major contributor to smog and acid rain. Nitrogen oxides result when atmospheric nitrogen and oxygen react at the high temperatures created by combustion engines. Most emissions in the U.S. result from combustion in vehicle engines, electrical utility, and industrial combustion.

NO₂ primarily gets in the air from the burning of fuel. NO₂ forms from emissions from cars, trucks and buses, power plants, and off-road equipment.

Health effects

Breathing air with a high concentration of NO₂ can irritate airways in the human respiratory system. Such exposures over short periods can aggravate respiratory diseases, particularly asthma, leading to respiratory symptoms (such as coughing, wheezing or difficulty breathing), hospital admissions and visits to emergency rooms. Longer exposures to elevated concentrations of NO₂ may contribute to the development of asthma and potentially increase susceptibility to respiratory infections. People with asthma, as well as children and the elderly are generally at greater risk for the health effects of NO₂.

NO₂ along with other NO_x reacts with other chemicals in the air to form both particulate matter and ozone. Both of these are also harmful when inhaled due to effects on the respiratory system.

Environmental effects

NO_2 and other NO_x interact with water, oxygen and other chemicals in the atmosphere to form acid rain. Acid rain harms sensitive ecosystems such as lakes and forests.

The nitrate particles that result from NO_x make the air hazy and difficult to see through. This affects the many national parks that we visit for the view. NO_x in the atmosphere contributes to nutrient pollution in coastal waters.

Ozone

Ground-level ozone (O_3) is a colorless gas with a slightly sweet odor that is not emitted directly into the air, but is created by the interaction of sunlight, heat, oxides of nitrogen (NO_x) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Ozone is likely to reach unhealthy levels on hot sunny days in urban environments. Emissions from industrial facilities and electric utilities, motor vehicle exhaust, gasoline vapors, and chemical solvents are some of the major sources of NO_x and VOCs.

Ozone is a gas composed of three atoms of oxygen (O_3). Ozone occurs both in the Earth's upper atmosphere and at ground level. Ozone can be good or bad, depending on where it is found.


Called stratospheric ozone, good ozone occurs naturally in the upper atmosphere, where it forms a protective layer that shields us from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays. This beneficial ozone has been partially destroyed by manmade chemicals, causing what is sometimes called a "hole in the ozone." The good news is, this hole is diminishing.

Ozone at ground level is a harmful air pollutant, because of its effects on people and the environment, and it is the main ingredient in "smog."

How does ground-level ozone form?

Tropospheric, or ground level ozone, is not emitted directly into the air, but is created by chemical reactions between oxides of nitrogen (NO_x) and volatile organic compounds (VOC). This happens when pollutants emitted by cars, power plants, industrial boilers, refineries, chemical plants, and other sources chemically react in the presence of sunlight.

Ozone is most likely to reach unhealthy levels on hot sunny days in urban environments, but can still reach high levels during colder months. Ozone can also be transported long distances by wind, so even rural areas can experience high ozone levels.

 This graphic depicts the formation of ozone from car and factory emissions

Health effects

Ozone in the air we breathe can harm our health especially on hot sunny days when ozone can reach unhealthy levels. People most at risk from breathing air containing ozone include people with asthma, children, older adults, and people who are active outdoors, especially outdoor workers.

Environmental effects

Ozone affects sensitive vegetation and ecosystems, including forests, parks, wildlife refuges and wilderness areas. In particular, ozone harms sensitive vegetation during the growing season.

Summary

- Carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides are the two main compounds from automobile emissions.
- Ozone but is created by chemical reactions between oxides of nitrogen (NO_x) and volatile organic compounds (VOC).
- Different levels of exposure to automobile emissions and ozone can lead to various health problems.

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