

4.5: Characteristics of Molecular Compounds

Learning Objectives

- Compare the properties of ionic and molecular compounds.

The physical state and properties of a particular compound depend in large part on the type of chemical bonding it displays. Molecular compounds, sometimes called covalent compounds, display a wide range of physical properties due to the different types of intermolecular attractions such as different kinds of polar interactions. The melting and boiling points of molecular compounds are generally quite low compared to those of ionic compounds. This is because the energy required to disrupt the *intermolecular forces* (discussed further in a later chapter) between molecules is far less than the energy required to break the ionic bonds in a crystalline ionic compound. Since molecular compounds are composed of neutral molecules, their electrical conductivity is generally quite poor, whether in the solid or liquid state. Ionic compounds do not conduct electricity in the solid state because of their rigid structure, but conduct well when either molten or dissolved into a solution. The water solubility of molecular compounds is variable and depends primarily on the type of intermolecular forces involved. Substances that exhibit hydrogen bonding or dipole-dipole forces are generally water soluble, whereas those that exhibit only London dispersion forces are generally insoluble. Most, but not all, ionic compounds are quite soluble in water. The table below summarizes some of the differences between ionic and molecular compounds.

Table 4.5.1: Comparison of Ionic and Molecular Compounds

Property	Ionic Compounds	Molecular Compounds
Type of elements	Metal and nonmetal	Nonmetals only
Bonding	Ionic - transfer of electron(s) between atoms	Covalent - sharing of pair(s) of electrons between atoms
Representative unit	Formula unit	Molecule
Physical state at room temperature	Solid	Gas, liquid, or solid
Water solubility	Usually high	Variable
Melting and boiling temperatures	Generally high	Generally low
Electrical conductivity	Good when molten or in solution	Poor

In summary, covalent compounds are softer, have lower boiling and melting points, are more flammable, are less soluble in water and do not conduct electricity compared to ionic compounds. The individual melting and boiling points, solubility and other physical properties of molecular compounds depend on molecular polarity.

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