

Air Pressure

This text is from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: National Weather Service.

The atoms and molecules that make up the various layers in the atmosphere are constantly moving in random directions. Despite their tiny size, when they strike a surface, they exert a force on that surface in what we observe as pressure.

Each molecule is too small to feel and only exerts a tiny bit of force. However, when we sum the total forces from the large number of molecules that strike a surface each moment, then the total observed pressure can be considerable.

Air pressure can be increased (or decreased) in two ways. First, simply adding molecules to any container will increase the pressure. A larger number of molecules in any container will increase the number of collisions with the container's boundary, which is observed as an increase in pressure.

A good example of this is adding (or subtracting) air to an automobile tire. By adding air, the number of molecules increases the total number of the collisions as well [as] with the tire's inner boundary. The increased number of collisions forces the tire's pressure increase to expand in size.

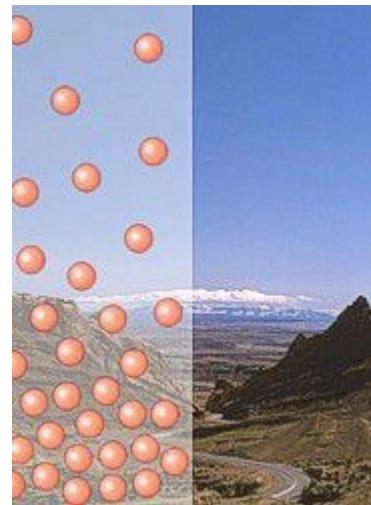
The second way of increasing (or decreasing) is by the addition (or subtraction) of heat. Adding heat to any container can transfer energy to air molecules. The molecules therefore move with increased velocity striking the container's boundary with greater force and are observed as an increase in pressure.

Since molecules move in all directions, they can even exert air pressure upwards as they smash into [an] object from underneath. In the atmosphere, air pressure can be exerted in all directions.

In the International Space Station, the density of the air is maintained so that it is like the density at the earth's surface. Therefore, the air pressure is the same in the space station as the earth's surface (14.7 pounds per square inch).

Back on Earth, as elevation increases, the number of molecules decreases and the density of air therefore is less, meaning a decrease in air pressure. In fact, while the atmosphere extends more than 15 miles (24 km) up, one half of the air molecules in the atmosphere are contained within the first 18,000 feet (5.6 km).

Five sentence response: What did this article teach you about air pressure?



The number of molecules in the atmosphere decreases with height.