

Q2: How is ozone formed in the atmosphere?

Ozone is formed throughout the atmosphere in multistep chemical processes that require sunlight. In the stratosphere, the process begins with an oxygen molecule (O₂) being broken apart by ultraviolet radiation from the Sun. In the lower atmosphere (troposphere), ozone is formed in a different set of chemical reactions involving hydrocarbons and nitrogen-containing gases.

Stratospheric ozone. Stratospheric ozone is naturally formed in chemical reactions involving ultraviolet sunlight and oxygen molecules, which make up 21% of the atmosphere. In the first step, sunlight breaks apart one oxygen molecule (O₂) to produce two oxygen atoms (2 O) (see Figure Q2-1). In the second step, each atom combines with an oxygen molecule to produce an ozone molecule (O₃). These reactions occur continually whenever ultraviolet sunlight is present in the stratosphere. As a result, the greatest ozone production occurs in the tropical stratosphere.

The production of stratospheric ozone is balanced by its destruction in chemical reactions. Ozone reacts continually with a wide variety of natural and human-

produced chemicals in the stratosphere. In each reaction, an ozone molecule is lost and other chemical compounds are produced. Important reactive gases that destroy ozone are those containing chlorine and bromine (see Q8).

Some stratospheric ozone is transported down into the troposphere and can influence ozone amounts at Earth's surface, particularly in remote, unpolluted regions of the globe.

Tropospheric ozone. Near Earth's surface, ozone is produced in chemical reactions involving naturally occurring gases and gases from pollution sources. Production reactions primarily involve hydrocarbon and nitrogen oxide gases and require sunlight. Fossil fuel combustion is a primary pollution source for tropospheric ozone production. The surface production of ozone does not significantly contribute to the abundance of stratospheric ozone. The amount of surface ozone is too small in comparison, and the transport of surface air to the stratosphere is not effective enough. As in the stratosphere, ozone in the troposphere is destroyed in naturally occurring chemical reactions and in reactions involving human-produced chemicals. Tropospheric ozone can also be destroyed when ozone reacts with a variety of surfaces, such as those of soils and plants.

Balance of chemical processes. Ozone abundances in the stratosphere and troposphere are determined by the *balance* between chemical processes that produce ozone and processes that destroy ozone. The balance is determined by the amounts of reacting gases and how the rate or effectiveness of the various reactions varies with sunlight intensity, location in the atmosphere, temperature, and other factors. As atmospheric conditions change to favor ozone-producing reactions in a certain location, ozone abundances will increase. Similarly, if conditions change to favor reactions that destroy ozone, abundances will decrease. The balance of production and loss reactions combined with atmospheric air motions determines the global distribution of ozone on time scales of days to many months. Global ozone has decreased in the last decades because the amounts of reactive gases containing chlorine and bromine have increased in the stratosphere (see Q13).

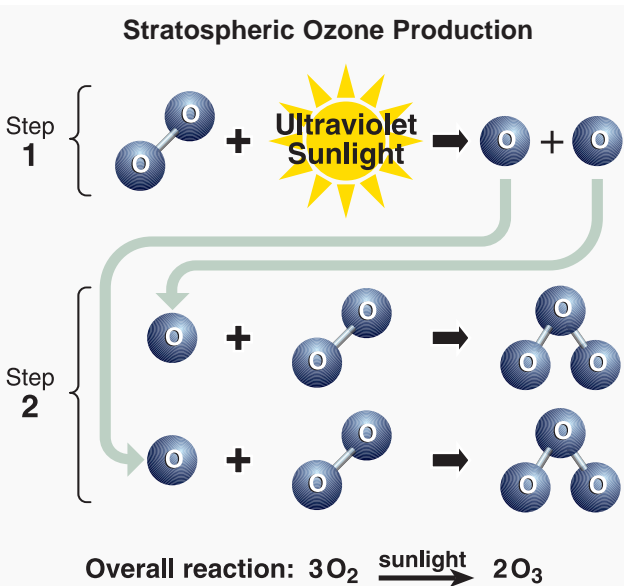


Figure Q2-1. Stratospheric ozone production. Ozone is naturally produced in the stratosphere in a two-step process. In the first step, ultraviolet sunlight breaks apart an oxygen molecule to form two separate oxygen atoms. In the second step, each atom then undergoes a binding collision with another oxygen molecule to form an ozone molecule. In the overall process, three oxygen molecules plus sunlight react to form two ozone molecules.