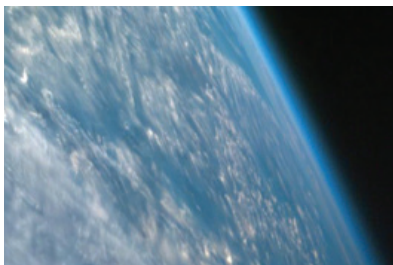




# Air

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is Air?



Air is the atmosphere that surrounds the earth in a thin envelope. It is made up of many gases. The most common is nitrogen. It makes up 78 percent of the air. Oxygen makes up 20.9 percent. The rest are small amounts of argon at just less than one percent, and not quite a half of a percent of carbon dioxide. Water vapor is another gas that is present, but it is very unevenly spread across the atmosphere. It is just less than a half of a percent over the entire atmosphere, but around one percent at sea level and can be as much as five percent in hot humid air masses.

### Which parts are important?

All the gases in the air are important. People and animals need the oxygen to breathe. People, plants and animals need the water vapor to create clouds and rain to provide water for drinking. Nitrogen in the air is part of a cycle that provides nitrates for plants to use to make protein that can travel up the food chain for people and animals to eat. Plants need the carbon dioxide to live and continue to produce oxygen that people and animals breathe. And while there is very little carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, there has been enough to keep the warmth of the planet in place and not escaping to space, so the atmosphere is at a temperature just right for life on earth.

### Why do we protect the air?

While the majority of gases are needed, human activities can create gases that are harmful. It is hard to imagine how polluted the air was 50 years ago. The federal Clean Air Act was created in response to millions of people demonstrating on the first Earth Day in 1970, calling for air, water and land in the country to be cleaned up and protected.

### What can I do to help?

- Look for recycled products when you shop.
- Processing fossil fuels into plastics creates pollution. Reduce plastic use, especially, one time use. Choose reusable water bottles and bags and skip the straw.
- Save energy everywhere you can. Turn off lights when you leave a room. Use a fan instead of lowering the air conditioner thermostat.
- Recycle what you can, like plastic bottles, bags, cans, paper and glass. Recycling saves energy and natural resources and protects air quality.
- Plant a tree. They act like air filters to improve air quality. Consider one native to where you live, they generally will thrive with less water or fertilizer.

