

II. THE OZONE DEPLETION PROCESS

Q6: What are the principal steps in stratospheric ozone depletion caused by human activities?

The initial step in the depletion of stratospheric ozone by human activities is the emission, at Earth's surface, of ozone-depleting gases containing chlorine and bromine. Most of these gases accumulate in the lower atmosphere because they are unreactive and do not dissolve readily in rain or snow. Eventually, these emitted source gases are transported to the stratosphere, where they are converted to more reactive gases containing chlorine and bromine. These more reactive gases then participate in reactions that destroy ozone. Finally, when air returns to the lower atmosphere, these reactive chlorine and bromine gases are removed from Earth's atmosphere by rain and snow.

Emission, accumulation, and transport. The principal steps in stratospheric ozone depletion caused by human activities are shown in Figure Q6-1. The process begins with the *emission*, at Earth's surface, of source gases containing the halogens chlorine and bromine (see Q7). The halogen source gases include manufactured chemicals released to the atmosphere by a variety of human activities. Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) are an important example of chlorine-containing gases. Emitted source gases *accumulate* in the lower atmosphere (troposphere) and are eventually *transported* to the stratosphere. The accumulation occurs because most source gases are unreactive in the lower atmosphere. However, small amounts of these gases dissolve or are taken up in ocean waters.

Some emissions of halogen gases come from natural sources (see Q7). These emissions also accumulate in the troposphere and are transported to the stratosphere.

Conversion, reaction, and removal. Halogen source gases do not react directly with ozone. Once in the stratosphere, halogen source gases are chemically converted to reactive halogen gases by ultraviolet radiation from the Sun (see Q8). The rate of conversion is related to the atmospheric lifetime of a gas (see Q7). Source gases with lifetimes greater than a few years may circulate between the troposphere and stratosphere multiple times before full conversion occurs.

The reactive gases formed in the eventual conversion of the halogen source gases react chemically to destroy ozone in the stratosphere (see Q9). The average depletion

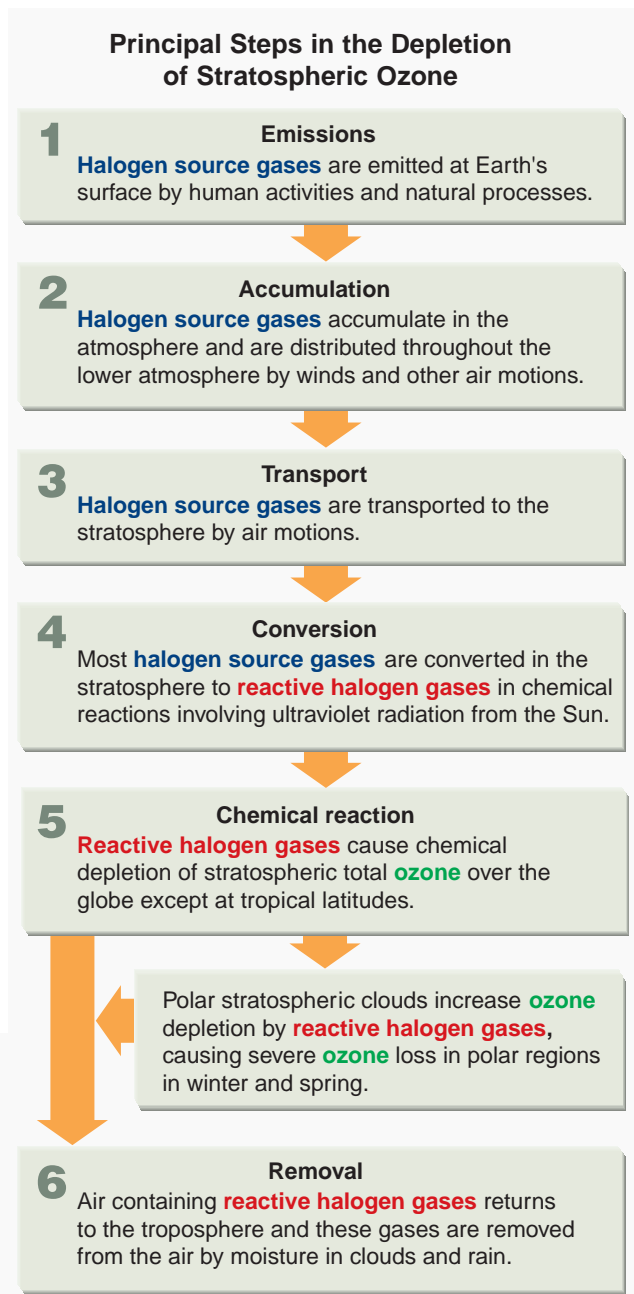


Figure Q6-1. Principal steps in stratospheric ozone depletion. The stratospheric ozone depletion process begins with the emission of halogen source gases at Earth's surface and ends when reactive halogen gases are removed by rain and snow in the troposphere and deposited on Earth's surface. In the stratosphere, the reactive halogen gases, namely chlorine monoxide (ClO) and bromine monoxide (BrO), destroy ozone.

TWENTY QUESTIONS: 2006 UPDATE

of total ozone attributed to reactive gases is smallest in the tropics and largest at high latitudes (see Q13). In polar regions, the presence of polar stratospheric clouds greatly increases the abundance of the most reactive halogen gases (see Q10). This results in substantial ozone destruction in polar regions in winter and spring (see Q11 and Q12).

After a few years, air in the stratosphere returns to the troposphere, bringing along reactive halogen gases. These gases are then removed from the atmosphere by rain and other precipitation and deposited on Earth's surface. This removal brings to an end the destruction of ozone by chlorine and bromine atoms that were first released to the atmosphere as components of halogen source gas molecules.

Tropospheric conversion. Halogen source gases with short lifetimes (see Q7) undergo significant chemical conversion in the troposphere, producing reactive halogen gases and other compounds. Source gas molecules that are not converted accumulate in the troposphere and are transported to the stratosphere. Because of removal by precipitation, only small portions of the reactive halogen gases produced in the troposphere are also transported to the stratosphere. Important examples of gases that undergo some tropospheric removal are the HCFCs, which are used as substitute gases for other halogen source gases (see Q15 and Q16), bromoform, and gases containing iodine (see Q7).

Understanding Stratospheric Ozone Depletion

Scientists learn about ozone destruction through a combination of laboratory studies, computer models, and stratospheric observations. In *laboratory studies* scientists are able to discover and evaluate individual chemical reactions that also occur in the stratosphere. Chemical reactions between two gases follow well-defined physical rules. Some of these reactions occur on the surfaces of particles formed in the stratosphere. Reactions have been studied that involve a wide variety of molecules containing chlorine, bromine, fluorine, and iodine and other atmospheric constituents such as oxygen, nitrogen, and hydrogen. These studies show that there exist several reactions involving chlorine and bromine that can directly or indirectly cause ozone destruction in the atmosphere.

With *computer models*, scientists can examine the overall effect of a large group of known reactions under the chemical and physical conditions found in the stratosphere. These models include winds, air temperatures, and the daily and seasonal changes in sunlight. With such analyses, scientists have shown that chlorine and bromine can react in catalytic cycles in which one chlorine or bromine atom can destroy many ozone molecules. Scientists use model results to compare with past observations as a test of our understanding of the atmosphere and to evaluate the importance of new reactions found in the laboratory. Computer models also enable scientists to explore the future by changing atmospheric conditions and other model parameters.

Scientists have conducted *observations* to find out which gases are present in various regions of the stratosphere and at what concentrations. They have monitored the change in these abundances over time periods spanning a daily cycle to decades. Observations have shown that halogen source gases and reactive halogen gases are present in the stratosphere at expected amounts. Ozone and chlorine monoxide (ClO), for example, have been observed extensively with a variety of instruments. Instruments on the ground and on board satellites, balloons, and aircraft detect ozone and ClO at a distance (remotely) using optical and microwave signals. High-altitude aircraft and balloon instruments detect both gases locally in the stratosphere (see Q5). For example, these observations show that ClO is present at elevated amounts in the Antarctic and Arctic stratospheres in the late winter/early spring season, when the most severe ozone depletion occurs (see Q8).