

# what is external force in physics

What is External Force in Physics

**What is external force in physics?** This fundamental concept is crucial for understanding how objects move, interact, and change their state of motion. Essentially, an external force is any influence that acts upon an object from outside its defined system, compelling it to accelerate, decelerate, or change direction. Without these outside influences, objects would simply continue in their current state, a principle famously described by Newton's first law of motion. This article will delve deeply into the nature of external forces, exploring their various types, their impact on systems, and their significance in both everyday phenomena and complex scientific applications, all while keeping the core question of what constitutes an external force at the forefront. We will unravel the intricacies of how these forces shape our physical reality.

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## What is an External Force?

An external force is a force that originates from outside a particular system being studied. Think of a system as a defined boundary - it could be a single object, a collection of objects, or even a region in space. When something outside that boundary interacts with something inside it and causes a change in motion or shape, that's an external force at play. Without these external pushes or pulls, an object would maintain its velocity (which includes being at rest), according to the laws of inertia. It's the external nudges and shoves from the universe around our system that make things happen, causing accelerations or deformations.

The concept of defining a "system" is paramount here. If we are studying a single ball, then gravity pulling it down is an external force. However, if our system is the Earth-ball combination, then gravity becomes an internal force because it's an interaction between components within the system. This distinction is absolutely vital for applying physics principles correctly, especially when dealing with momentum and energy conservation.

## Key Characteristics of External Forces

External forces possess several defining characteristics that set them apart and dictate their effects. Firstly, they are contact forces or non-contact

forces acting from outside the system's boundaries. This means they aren't generated by the object itself or by interactions between elements within the system. Secondly, external forces are responsible for changing an object's state of motion. If an object is at rest, an external force is needed to get it moving. If it's already moving, an external force can speed it up, slow it down, or change its direction. Thirdly, external forces can also cause deformation. Imagine squishing a sponge; the force you apply from the outside is an external force causing it to change shape.

Another critical characteristic is that external forces are quantifiable and can be represented as vectors, possessing both magnitude and direction. This vector nature is crucial for predicting the net effect on an object, as forces can cancel each other out or combine to produce a resultant force. Without an external force, an object in motion would continue in motion with constant velocity, and an object at rest would remain at rest – the essence of inertia.

## Distinguishing External Forces from Internal Forces

The distinction between external and internal forces hinges entirely on the definition of the system you are analyzing. Internal forces are those that arise from interactions between objects or parts within the system. For example, if you consider a car as your system, the force exerted by the engine on the wheels to make the car move is an internal force. Similarly, the forces that hold the atoms together within a molecule are internal forces to that molecule.

External forces, conversely, come from agents outside the system. If our car system is on a road, the friction between the tires and the road is an external force that helps the car accelerate or brake. Gravity pulling the car downwards is also an external force (unless the Earth is part of the system). This clear demarcation allows physicists to use conservation laws effectively. For instance, the total momentum of a system remains constant if and only if the net external force on the system is zero. Internal forces, though they can cause motion within the system, do not change the system's total momentum.

## Types of External Forces

External forces manifest in a myriad of forms, each with its unique origin and effect. Understanding these different types is key to comprehending how the physical world operates. These forces can broadly be categorized into contact forces and non-contact forces.

- **Contact Forces:** These forces occur when objects physically touch. Examples include:

- **Friction:** The resistance to motion when two surfaces slide or tend to slide against each other.

- Normal Force: The perpendicular support force exerted by a surface on an object in contact with it.
  - Tension: The pulling force transmitted through a rope, string, or wire when it is pulled taut.
  - Applied Force: A force that is applied to an object by another object or person.
  - Spring Force: The force exerted by a compressed or stretched spring.
- **Non-Contact Forces (Field Forces):** These forces act over a distance, without direct physical contact. Examples include:
    - Gravitational Force: The attractive force between any two objects with mass.
    - Electromagnetic Force: The force between electrically charged particles, encompassing electric and magnetic forces.
    - Nuclear Forces: The strong and weak forces that operate within the nucleus of an atom.

Each of these force types plays a critical role in governing the interactions and movements we observe daily. For instance, the gravitational force from the Earth is an external force that keeps us grounded, while friction is an external force that allows us to walk without slipping.

## The Role of External Forces in Newton's Laws of Motion

Newton's laws of motion are foundational to classical physics, and external forces are at the very heart of these laws. Newton's First Law, the Law of Inertia, states that an object will remain at rest or in uniform motion in a straight line unless acted upon by a net external force. This law directly highlights the necessity of external forces to alter an object's state of motion. If there's no net external force, there's no change in velocity.

Newton's Second Law quantifies the relationship between force, mass, and acceleration:  $F_{\text{net}} = ma$ . Here,  $F_{\text{net}}$  represents the net external force acting on an object. This means that the acceleration of an object is directly proportional to the net external force acting on it and inversely proportional to its mass. The direction of the acceleration is in the same direction as the net external force. This law is arguably the most powerful in classical mechanics, as it allows us to predict how objects will move when subjected to known external forces.

Newton's Third Law, the law of action-reaction, also implicitly involves external forces when considering multiple interacting systems. While the

action-reaction forces are internal to the pair of interacting objects, their impact on the motion of individual objects within a larger system often depends on how these forces interact with the external environment.

## **External Forces in Everyday Life**

The world around us is a constant demonstration of external forces in action. Every time you push open a door, you are applying an external force. When you throw a ball, gravity and air resistance are external forces acting on it, dictating its parabolic trajectory. The normal force from the ground is what prevents you from falling through the floor as you walk, and friction between your shoes and the ground is essential for propulsion.

Consider driving a car. The engine provides internal forces to turn the wheels, but it's the external force of friction between the tires and the road that actually propels the car forward. Braking involves another external force, friction, working in opposition to the car's motion. Even seemingly simple acts like sitting on a chair involve external forces: gravity pulling you down and the chair exerting an upward normal force to support you. These ubiquitous external influences are what make our physical interactions possible and predictable.

## **Advanced Applications of External Forces**

Beyond everyday experiences, the understanding of external forces is paramount in numerous advanced scientific and engineering fields. In aerospace, engineers meticulously calculate the external forces of lift, drag, thrust, and gravity to design aircraft and spacecraft that can navigate the atmosphere and space. The launch of a rocket, for instance, relies on overcoming Earth's gravitational pull through powerful thrust, an external force generated by the rocket itself.

In structural engineering, analyzing external forces like wind load, seismic activity, and the weight of materials is crucial for designing safe and stable buildings and bridges. Any deviation from expected external forces could lead to catastrophic failure. In particle physics, understanding the electromagnetic and nuclear forces (which are non-contact external forces at that scale) is fundamental to comprehending the behavior of subatomic particles and the structure of matter itself. The very fabric of the universe, from the orbits of planets to the interactions within atoms, is governed by these fundamental external forces.

## **Understanding Force Vectors**

Since forces have both magnitude (how strong the push or pull is) and direction, they are vector quantities. Representing forces as vectors is crucial for accurately predicting the outcome of multiple forces acting on an object. Imagine trying to push a heavy box. If you push it directly forward, that's one force vector. If someone else pushes it sideways simultaneously, you have another force vector. To find out where the box will actually move,

you need to add these vectors together, taking their directions into account.

Vector addition can be done graphically or mathematically. Graphically, you might draw arrows representing each force, and then connect them tip-to-tail to find the resultant vector, which shows the direction and magnitude of the net force. Mathematically, you can break down each force vector into its components (e.g., horizontal and vertical components) and then add the corresponding components together. The resulting components then define the net force vector. This is why understanding vector mathematics is indispensable when dealing with forces in physics.

## **The Impact of External Forces on Momentum and Energy**

External forces are intrinsically linked to changes in an object's momentum and energy. Momentum, a measure of an object's mass in motion ( $p = mv$ ), changes when a net external force acts over a period of time. The impulse-momentum theorem states that the impulse applied to an object (which is the net external force multiplied by the time interval over which it acts) is equal to the change in the object's momentum. This means that to change an object's speed or direction, you need an external force acting for some duration.

Similarly, external forces are responsible for changes in kinetic energy (energy of motion) and potential energy (stored energy). Work is done when a force causes displacement. If an external force does positive work on an object, its kinetic energy increases. If it does negative work, its kinetic energy decreases. For conservative forces (like gravity and ideal spring forces), the work done by these external forces can be related to changes in potential energy. Understanding these relationships allows us to analyze energy transformations and conservation within a system.

The universe is a dynamic place, constantly shaped by the interplay of objects and the forces that act upon them. From the grand sweep of galaxies to the minuscule interactions within atoms, external forces are the catalysts for change, dictating motion, transformation, and the very structure of reality. Grasping the concept of what an external force is, its various forms, and its profound implications is not just a step in learning physics; it's a key to understanding the mechanics of existence itself. Whether you're designing a bridge, launching a satellite, or simply enjoying a game of catch, the principles of external forces are invisibly at work, orchestrating the physical events around us.

## **FAQ**

**Q: What is the primary difference between an external force and an internal force?**

**A:** The primary difference lies in their origin relative to a defined system. An external force acts on the system from outside its boundaries, while an internal force arises from interactions between components within the system.

**Q: Can an object move without any external forces acting on it?**

A: Yes, an object can move without any net external force acting on it if it is already in motion. According to Newton's First Law, it will continue to move with constant velocity (constant speed and direction) in the absence of a net external force. However, to change its state of motion (start moving, stop moving, or change direction), an external force is always required.

**Q: Is gravity an external force?**

A: Gravity is an external force if the object experiencing gravity is not part of the system that includes the source of the gravitational field (e.g., Earth). If the system being studied includes both the object and the Earth, then gravity would be considered an internal force within that combined system.

**Q: How do external forces affect the momentum of a system?**

A: A net external force acting on a system is directly responsible for changing the total momentum of that system. The impulse-momentum theorem states that the impulse (net external force times time) equals the change in momentum. Internal forces, on the other hand, do not change the total momentum of a system.

**Q: What are some common examples of external forces encountered in daily life?**

A: Common examples include the force of gravity pulling you down, the normal force from the ground supporting you, friction between your shoes and the ground, air resistance acting on a moving object, and the force you apply when pushing or pulling something.

**Q: Why is it important to identify external forces in physics problems?**

A: Identifying external forces is crucial because they are the only forces that can change an object's or system's state of motion (acceleration). They are central to applying Newton's laws of motion and understanding concepts like work, energy, and momentum conservation.

**Q: Can an object be in equilibrium if external forces are acting on it?**

A: Yes, an object can be in equilibrium even if external forces are acting on it, provided that the net external force acting on it is zero. Equilibrium means the object's velocity is constant, which includes being at rest or moving with constant velocity. This can happen if multiple external forces balance each other out.

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