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# What Causes Acid Rain?

**Sources of Acid Rain**

Acid rain is caused by a chemical reaction that begins when compounds like sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides are released into the air. These substances can rise very high into the atmosphere, where they mix and react with water, oxygen, and other chemicals to form more acidic pollutants, known as acid rain. Sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides dissolve very easily in water and can be carried very far by the wind. As a result, the two compounds can travel long distances where they become part of the rain, sleet, snow, and fog that we experience on certain days.

Human activities are the main cause of acid rain. Over the past few decades, humans have released so many different chemicals into the air that they have changed the mix of gases in the atmosphere. Power plants release the majority of sulfur dioxide and much of the nitrogen oxides when they burn fossil fuels, such as coal, to produce electricity. In addition, the exhaust from cars, trucks, and buses releases nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide into the air. These pollutants cause acid rain.

**Acid Rain is Caused by Reactions in the Environment**

Nature depends on balance, and although some rain is naturally acidic, with a pH level of around 5.0, human activities have made it worse. Normal precipitation—such as rain, sleet, or snow—reacts with alkaline chemicals, or non-acidic materials, that can be found in air, soils, bedrock, lakes, and streams. These reactions usually neutralize natural acids. However, if precipitation becomes too acidic, these materials may not be able to neutralize all of the acids. Over time, these neutralizing materials can be washed away by acid rain. Damage to crops, trees, lakes, rivers, and animals can result.