

Solar Energy

What is Solar Energy?

Every day, the sun radiates (sends out) an enormous amount of energy—called **solar energy**. It radiates more energy in one second than the world has used since time began. This energy comes from within the sun itself.

Like most stars, the sun is a big gas ball made up mostly of hydrogen and helium gas. The sun makes energy in its inner core in a process called **nuclear fusion**.

It takes the sun's energy just a little over eight minutes to travel the 93 million miles to Earth. Solar energy travels at a speed of 186,000 miles per second, the speed of light.

Only a small part of the **radiant energy** that the sun emits into space ever reaches the Earth, but that is more than enough to supply all our energy needs. Every day enough solar energy reaches the Earth to supply our nation's energy needs for a year! Solar energy is considered a **renewable energy** source.

Today, people use solar energy to heat buildings and water and to generate electricity.

Solar Collectors

Heating with solar energy is not as easy as you might think. Capturing sunlight and putting it to work is difficult because the solar energy that reaches the Earth is spread out over a large area. The sun does not deliver that much energy to any one place at any one time.

The amount of solar energy an area receives depends on the time of day, the season of the year, the cloudiness of the sky, and how close you are to the Earth's equator.

A **solar collector** is one way to capture sunlight and change it into usable heat energy. A closed car on a sunny day is like a solar collector. As sunlight passes through the car's windows, it is absorbed by the seat covers, walls, and floor of the car. The absorbed light changes into heat. The car's windows let light in, but they don't let all the heat out. A closed car can get very hot!

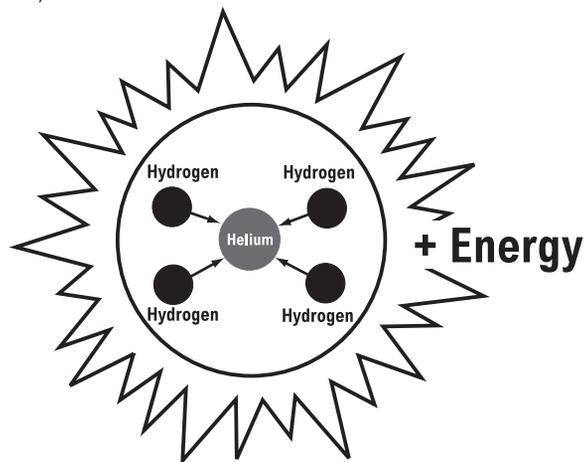
Solar Space Heating

Space heating means heating the space inside a building. Today, many homes use solar energy for space heating. A passive solar home is designed to let in as much sunlight as possible. It is like a big solar collector.

Sunlight passes through the windows and heats the walls and floor inside the house. The light can get in, but the heat is trapped inside. A **passive solar home** does not depend on mechanical equipment, such as pumps and blowers, to heat the house.

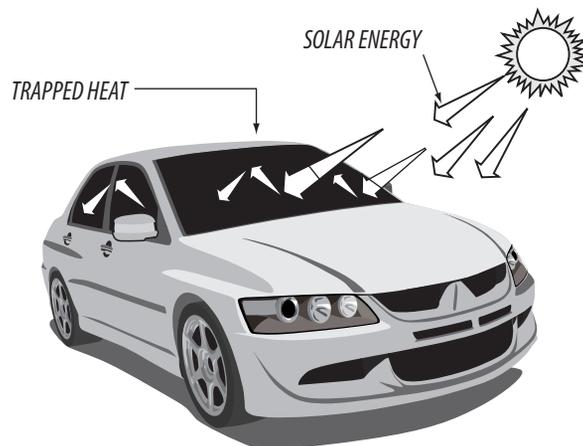
Fusion

During a process called fusion, four hydrogen atoms combine to form one helium atom, with a transformation of matter. This matter is emitted as radiant energy.

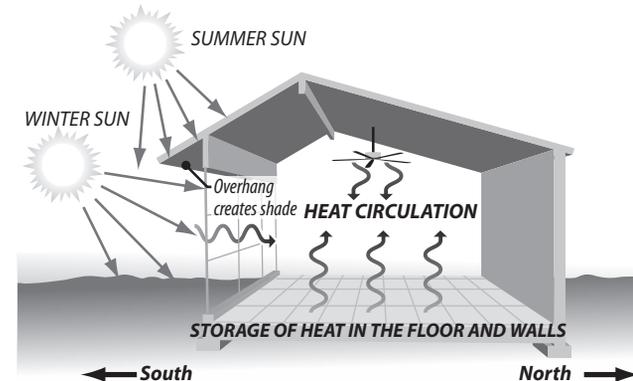


Solar Collector

On a sunny day, a closed car becomes a solar collector. Light energy passes through the window glass, is absorbed by the car's interior, and converted into heat energy. The heat energy becomes trapped inside.



Passive Solar Home



Solar Water Heating

Solar energy can be used to heat water. Heating water for bathing, dishwashing, and clothes washing is the third largest home energy cost.

A solar water heater works a lot like solar space heating. In our hemisphere, a solar collector is mounted on the south side of a roof where it can capture sunlight. The sunlight heats water in a tank. The hot water is piped to faucets throughout a house, just as it would be with an ordinary water heater. Today, more than 1.5 million homes and businesses in the U.S. use solar water heaters.

Solar Electricity

Solar energy can also be used to produce electricity. Two ways to make electricity from solar energy are photovoltaics and solar thermal systems.

■ Photovoltaic Electricity

Photovoltaic comes from the words *photo* meaning light and *volt*, a measurement of electricity. Sometimes **photovoltaic cells** are called PV cells or **solar cells** for short. You are probably familiar with photovoltaic cells. Solar-powered toys, calculators, and roadside telephone call boxes all use solar cells to convert sunlight into electricity.

Solar cells are made up of **silicon**, the same substance that makes up sand. Silicon is the second most common substance on Earth. Solar cells can supply energy to anything that is powered by batteries or electrical power.

Electricity is produced when sunlight strikes the solar cell, causing the electrons to move around. The action of the electrons starts an electric current. The conversion of sunlight into electricity takes place silently and instantly. There are no mechanical parts to wear out.

You won't see many photovoltaic power plants today. Compared to other ways of making electricity, photovoltaic systems are expensive. In 2009, the DeSoto Next Generation Solar Energy Center in Florida opened. It is the largest photovoltaic plant in the country, generating 25 megawatts of electricity—enough to power 3,000 homes.

It costs 10 to 20 cents a kilowatt-hour to produce electricity from solar cells. Most people pay their electric companies about 12 cents a kilowatt-hour for the electricity they use, and large industrial consumers pay less. Today, solar systems are mainly used to generate electricity in remote areas that are a long way from electric power lines.

■ Solar Thermal Electricity

Like solar cells, **solar thermal systems**, also called **concentrated solar power (CSP)**, use solar energy to produce electricity, but in a different way. Most solar thermal systems use a solar collector with a mirrored surface to focus sunlight onto a receiver that heats a liquid. The super-heated liquid is used to make steam to produce electricity in the same way that coal plants do.

There are nine solar thermal power plants in the Mojave Desert that together produce 360 MW of electricity.

Solar energy has great potential for the future. Solar energy is free, and its supplies are unlimited. It does not pollute or otherwise damage the environment. It cannot be controlled by any one nation or industry. If we can improve the technology to harness the sun's enormous power, we may never face energy shortages again.

SOLAR WATER HEATER



SOLAR PANELS



SOLAR THERMAL ELECTRICITY



Image courtesy of U.S. Department of Energy

Parabolic troughs concentrate the sun's radiant energy, heating fluid that is used to create steam. The steam turns a generator, which produces electricity.