



Exploring Structures—Buckyballs

Try this!

1. Take a precut paper shape.
2. Fold it along the scored lines to make a model of a tiny, nanoscale structure.
3. Put the tabs in the slots to hold it together. What does your model look like?



What's going on?

You've made a model of a buckyball, a tiny molecule made of 60 carbon atoms. Buckyballs look like soccer balls or geodesic domes. They're named after the architect Buckminster Fuller, who made dome structures popular.

Buckyballs are just one form of carbon. Carbon can also form diamond, the hardest natural material known on Earth, and graphite, one of the softest materials.

Diamond, graphite, and buckyballs are all made entirely from carbon! They have different properties because the carbon atoms are arranged differently at the nanoscale.

How is this nano?

Buckyballs are tiny, soccerball-shaped molecules made of carbon. Buckyballs are only one nanometer across! (A nanometer is a billionth of a meter.)

In the field of nanotechnology, scientists and engineers study the world of the nanometer and make new materials and tiny devices. They use special tools and equipment to detect and manipulate nanometer-sized particles like buckyballs.

Buckyballs are good lubricants because of their spherical shape. Their hollow structure could make them useful for delivering medicine in the future.





Exploring Structures—Buckyballs

Learning objective

Buckyballs are tiny, soccerball-shaped molecules made of carbon.

Materials

- Die-cut buckyball templates
- *Carbon Structures* poster

Note to the presenter

This activity can be paired with *Exploring Tools—SPMs* to explore how nanoscientists investigate and manipulate materials (such as buckyballs) that are too small to see.

Credits and rights

The information presented here was adapted from:

- “Exploring the Nanoworld Applications Activity: Nanoarchitecture,” developed by the National Science Foundation-supported Internships in Public Science Education (IPSE) Educator Resources, Materials Research Science and Engineering Center on Nanostructured Materials and Interfaces at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The original activity is available at: mrsec.wisc.edu/Edetc/IPSE/educators/carbon.html
- “Exploring the Nanoworld: Carbon Nanotubes & Buckyballs,” developed by Materials Research Science and Engineering Center on Nanostructured Materials and Interfaces at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with support from the National Science Foundation. The original activity is available at: mrsec.wisc.edu/Edetc/nanoquest/carbon/
- “Nanoarchitecture: Forms of Carbon,” developed by the National Science Foundation-supported Internships in Public Science Education (IPSE) Educator Resources, Materials Research Science and Engineering Center on Nanostructured Materials and Interfaces at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The original activity is available at: mrsec.wisc.edu/Edetc/IPSE/educators/activities/carbon.html



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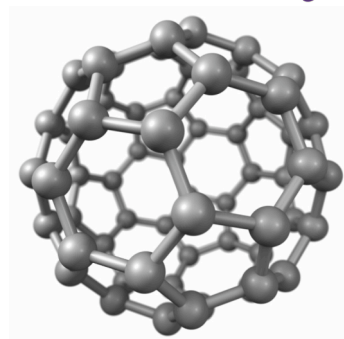


Buckyball Background Information

What are buckyballs?

Buckyballs are tiny molecules made of 60 carbon atoms. They're named after Buckminster Fuller, an architect who designed geodesic dome structures similar to the one at Epcot Center.

Buckyball molecules are just one form of carbon. Carbon atoms can form many different structures, and different forms of carbon have very different properties.



Model of a buckyball

What other forms can carbon take?

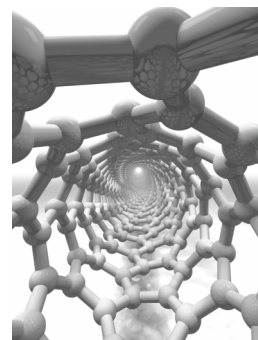
Carbon can form diamond, the hardest natural material known on Earth. But it can also form one of the softest materials, graphite (pencil lead). Both diamonds and graphite are made entirely from carbon. They have different properties because the carbon atoms are arranged differently at the nanoscale.

Carbon can also form two tiny, nanometer-sized structures that are too small to see: buckyballs and carbon nanotubes. **Buckyballs** have a soccer-ball shape. **Carbon nanotubes** are long, hollow tubes. Buckyballs and carbon nanotubes have special properties due to the way their carbon atoms are arranged.

How are buckyballs and carbon nanotubes used?

Buckyballs are good lubricants because of their spherical shape. Their hollow structure could make them useful for delivering medicine in the future.

Carbon nanotubes are very strong and light, and can act as semiconductors or conductors. They're used to strengthen composite materials. Researchers are studying ways to use carbon nanotubes in electronics, fuel cells, and other applications.



Model of the inside of a carbon nanotube

How is this nano?

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Buckyballs and carbon nanotubes occur naturally. They're found in soot and in outer space, and are produced when lightning strikes. Scientists who work on the nanoscale are studying how to make these tiny particles and how to use them to build other things.

Carbon is one of the most abundant elements on Earth and is found in all living things. It's in DNA, proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. Our bodies are around 20% carbon! So it's not surprising that carbon is also a key material in nanotechnology.

