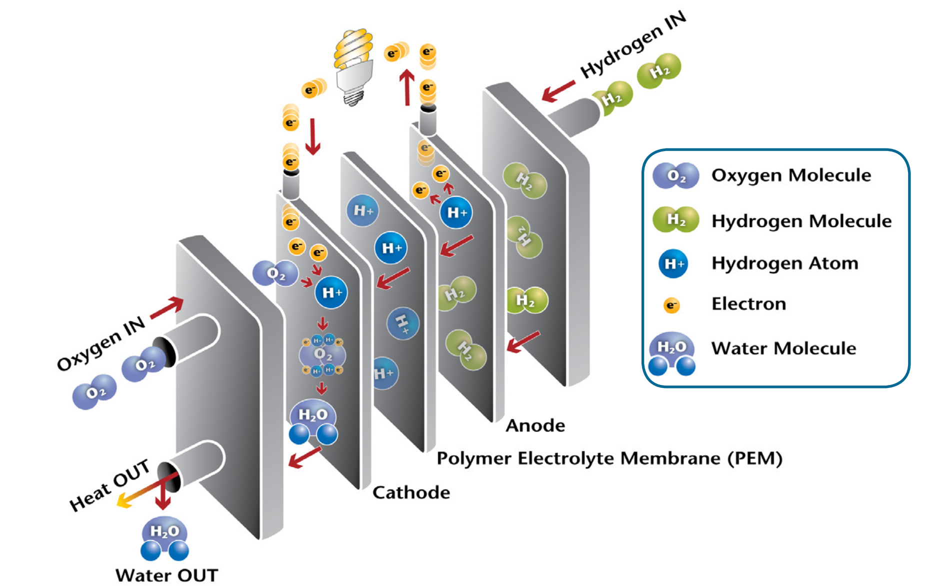
Fuel Cells



Fuel cells directly convert the chemical energy in hydrogen to electricity, with pure water and potentially useful heat as the only byproducts. Hydrogen-powered fuel cells are not only pollution-free, but also can have more than two times the efficiency of traditional combustion technologies.

Hydrogen is a versatile energy carrier that can be used to power nearly every end-use energy need. The fuel cell — an energy conversion device that can efficiently capture and use the power of hydrogen — is the key to making it happen.

Stationary fuel cells can be used for backup power, power for remote locations, distributed power generation, and cogeneration (in which excess heat released during electricity generation is used for other applications).

Fuel cells can power almost any portable application that typically uses batteries, from hand-held devices to portable generators.

Fuel cells can also power our transportation, including personal vehicles, trucks, buses, marine vessels, and other specialty vehicles such as lift trucks and ground support equipment, as well as provide auxiliary power to traditional transportation technologies. Hydrogen can play a particularly important role in the future by replacing the imported petroleum we currently use in our cars and trucks.

Why Fuel Cells?

Fuel cells directly convert the chemical energy in hydrogen to electricity, with pure water and potentially useful heat as the only byproducts. Hydrogen-powered fuel cells are not only pollution-free, but they can also have more than two times the efficiency of traditional combustion technologies.

A conventional combustion-based power plant typically generates electricity at efficiencies of 33-35%, while fuel cell systems can generate electricity at efficiencies up to 60% (and even higher with cogeneration).

The gasoline engine in a conventional car is less than 20% efficient in converting the chemical energy in gasoline into power that moves the vehicle, under normal driving conditions. Hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, which use electric motors, are much more energy efficient and use 40-60% of the fuel's energy — corresponding to more than a 50% reduction in fuel consumption, compared to a conventional vehicle with a gasoline internal combustion engine.

In addition, fuel cells operate quietly, have fewer moving parts, and are well suited to a variety of applications.

How Do Fuel Cells Work?

A single fuel cell consists of an electrolyte sandwiched between two electrodes, an anode and a cathode. Bipolar plates on either side of the cell help distribute gases and serve as current collectors. In a Polymer Electrolyte Membrane (PEM) fuel cell, which is widely regarded as the most promising for light-duty transportation, hydrogen gas flows through channels to the anode, where a catalyst causes the hydrogen molecules to separate into protons and electrons. The membrane allows only the protons to pass through it. While the protons are conducted through the membrane to the other side of the cell, the stream of negatively-charged electrons follows an external circuit to the cathode. This flow of electrons is electricity that can be used to do work, such as power a motor.

On the other side of the cell, air flows through channels to the cathode. When the electrons return from doing work, they react with oxygen in the air and the hydrogen protons (which have moved through the membrane) at the cathode to form water. This union is an exothermic reaction, generating heat that can be used outside the fuel cell.

The power produced by a fuel cell depends on several factors, including the fuel cell type, size, temperature at which it operates, and pressure at which gases are supplied. A single fuel cell produces barely enough voltage for even the smallest applications. To increase the voltage, individual fuel cells are combined in series to form a stack. (The term "fuel cell" is often used to refer to the entire stack, as well as to the individual cell.) Depending on the application, a fuel cell stack may contain only a few or as many as hundreds of individual cells layered together. This "scalability" makes fuel cells ideal for a wide variety of applications, from laptop computers (20-50 W) to homes (1-5 kW), vehicles (50-125 kW), and central power generation (1-200 MW or more).

Comparison of Fuel Cell Technologies

In general, all fuel cells have the same basic configuration — an electrolyte and two electrodes. But there are different types of fuel cells, classified primarily by the kind of electrolyte used. The electrolyte determines the kind of chemical reactions that take place in the fuel cell, the temperature range of operation, and other factors that determine its most suitable applications.

Challenges and Research Directions

Reducing cost and improving durability are the two most significant challenges to fuel cell commercialization. Fuel cell systems must be cost-competitive with, and perform as well or better than, traditional power technologies over the life of the system. Ongoing research is focused on identifying and developing new materials that will reduce the cost and extend the life of fuel cell stack components including membranes, catalysts, bipolar plates, and membrane-electrode assemblies. Low-cost, high-volume manufacturing processes will also help to make fuel cell systems cost competitive with traditional technologies.

For More Information

More information on the Fuel Cell Technologies Program is available at *http://www.hydrogenandfuelcells.energy.gov*.

Comparison of Fuel Cell Technologies

Fuel Cell Type	Common Electrolyte	Operating Temperature	Typical Stack Size	Efficiency	Applications	Advantages	Challenges
Polymer Electrolyte Membrane (PEM)*	Perfluoro sulfonic acid	50-100°C 122-212°F typically 80°C	1 kW–100 kW	60% transportation 35% stationary	• Backup power • Portable power • Distributed generation • Transportation • Specialty vehicles	• Solid electrolyte reduces corrosion & electrolyte management problems • Low temperature • Quick start-up	• Expensive catalysts • Sensitive to fuel impurities • Low temperature waste heat
Alkaline (AFC)	Aqueous solution of potassium hydroxide soaked in a matrix	90-100°C 194-212°F	10–100 kW	60%	• Military • Space	• Cathode reaction faster in alkaline electrolyte, leads to high performance • Low cost components	• Sensitive to CO_2 in fuel and air • Electrolyte management
Phosphoric Acid (PAFC)	Phosphoric acid soaked in a matrix	150-200°C 302-392°F	400 kW 100 kW module	40%	• Distributed generation	• Higher temperature enables CHP • Increased tolerance to fuel impurities	• Pt catalyst • Long start up time • Low current and power
Molten Carbonate (MCFC)	Solution of lithium, sodium, and/or potassium carbonates, soaked in a matrix	600-700°C 1112-1292°F	300 kW–3 MW 300 kW module	45-50%	• Electric utility • Distributed generation	• High efficiency • Fuel flexibility • Can use a variety of catalysts • Suitable for CHP	• High temperature corrosion and breakdown of cell components • Long start up time • Low power density
Solid Oxide (SOFC)	Yttria stabilized zirconia	700-1000°C 1202-1832°F	1 kW–2 MW	60%	• Auxiliary power • Electric utility • Distributed generation	• High efficiency • Fuel flexibility • Can use a variety of catalysts • Solid electrolyte • Suitable for CHP & CHHP • Hybrid/GT cycle	• High temperature corrosion and breakdown of cell components • High temperature operation requires long start up time and limits

*Direct Methanol Fuel Cells (DMFC) are a subset of PEM typically used for small portable power applications with a size range of about a subwatt to 250 W and operating at 60-90°C.

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November 2010