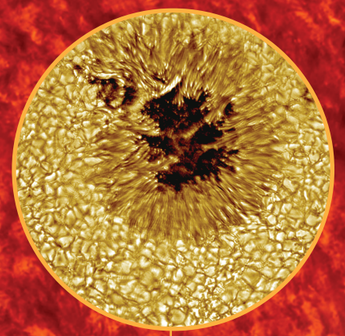
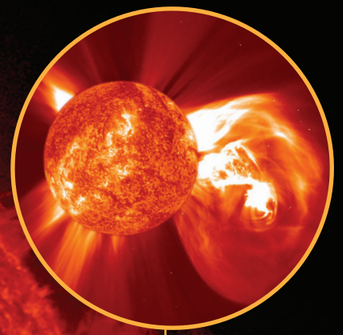
Space Weather

Space weather refers to the variable conditions on the Sun and in the space environment that can influence the performance and reliability of space-based and ground-based technological systems, as well as endanger life or health. Just like weather on Earth, space weather has its seasons, with solar activity rising and falling over an approximate 11 year cycle.

Sunspots

Sunspots are comparatively cool areas at up to 7,700° F and show the location of strong magnetic fields protruding through what we would see as the Sun's surface. Large, complex sunspot groups are generally the source of significant space weather.





Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs)

Large portions of the corona, or outer atmosphere of the Sun, can be explosively blown into space, sending billions of tons of plasma, or superheated gas, Earth's direction. These CMEs have their own magnetic field and can slam into and interact with Earth's magnetic field, resulting in geomagnetic storms. The fastest of these CMEs can reach Earth in under a day, with the slowest taking 4 or 5 days to reach Earth.

Solar Wind

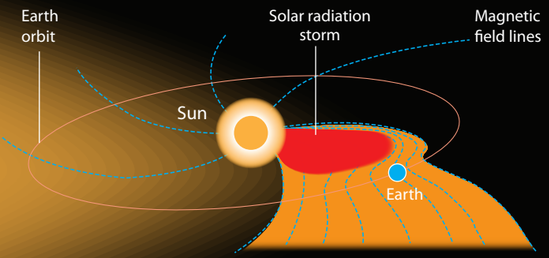
The solar wind is a constant outflow of electrons and protons from the Sun, always present and buffeting Earth's magnetic field. The background solar wind flows at approximately one million miles per hour!

Sun's Magnetic Field

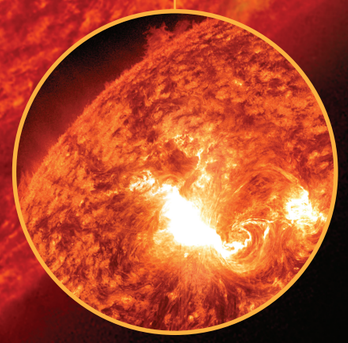
Strong and ever-changing magnetic fields drive the life of the Sun and underlie sunspots. These strong magnetic fields are the energy source for space weather and their twisting, shearing, and reconnection lead to solar flares.

Solar Radiation Storms

Charged particles, including electrons and protons, can be accelerated by coronal mass ejections and solar flares. These particles bounce and gyrate their way through space, roughly following the magnetic field lines and ultimately bombarding Earth from every direction. The fastest of these particles can affect Earth tens of minutes after a solar flare.



Corona



Solar Flares

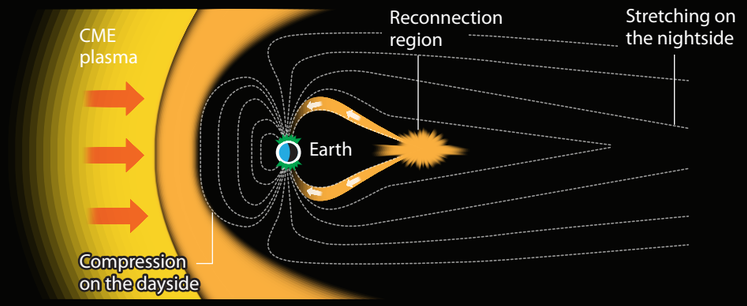
Reconnection of the magnetic fields on the surface of the Sun drive the biggest explosions in our solar system. These solar flares release immense amounts of energy and result in electromagnetic emissions spanning the spectrum from gamma rays to radio waves. Traveling at the speed of light, these emissions make the 93 million mile trip to Earth in just 8 minutes.

Earth's Magnetic Field

Earth's magnetic field, largely like that of a bar magnet, gives the Earth some protection from the effects of the Sun. Earth's magnetic field is constantly compressed on the day side and stretched on the night side by the ever-present solar wind. During geomagnetic storms, the disturbances to Earth's magnetic field can become extreme. In addition to some buffering by the atmosphere, this field also offers some shielding from the charged particles of a radiation storm.

Geomagnetic Storms

A geomagnetic storm is a temporary disturbance of Earth's magnetic field typically associated with enhancements in the solar wind. These storms are created when the solar wind and its magnetic field interacts with Earth's magnetic field. The primary source of geomagnetic storms is CMEs which stretch the magnetosphere on the nightside causing it to release energy through magnetic reconnection. Disturbances in the ionosphere (a region of Earth's upper atomosphere) are usually associated with geomagnetic storms.



Source images: NASA, NOAA.

NOAA Space Weather Prediction Center – www.spaceweather.gov

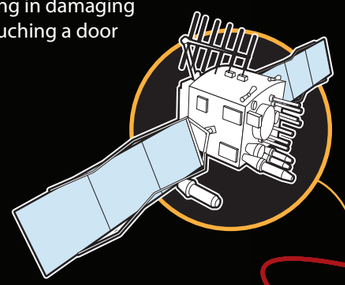
Space Weather Impacts on Earth

Global Positioning System (GPS)

Geomagnetic storms can impact the accuracy and availability of GPS by changing the ionosphere, the electrically charged layer of the atmosphere a GPS signal must pass through from satellite to ground receiver. The ionosphere is the largest source of error in GPS positioning and navigation. These ionospheric disturbances are ever-present but can become severe during geomagnetic storms, resulting in range errors in excess of 100 feet, or even resulting in loss of lock on the GPS signal entirely. These errors can have significant impacts on precision uses of GPS such as navigation, agriculture, oil drilling, surveying, and timing.

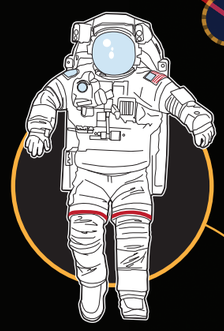
Satellite Operations

There are thousands of satellites in orbit around Earth with applications in television and radio, communications, meteorology, national defense, and much more. Space weather can affect these satellites in many ways. Solar radiation storms can cause spacecraft orientation problems by interfering with star trackers and by causing errors or damage in electronic devices. Geomagnetic storms can create a hazardous charging environment for satellites resulting in damaging electrostatic discharge, much like touching a door knob and getting that spark on a dry winter day. Geomagnetic storms also cause heating of the atmosphere, essentially causing it to expand, which results in more drag or slowing down of an orbiting satellite. In a worst case, space weather can cause the satellite to fail.



Space Operations

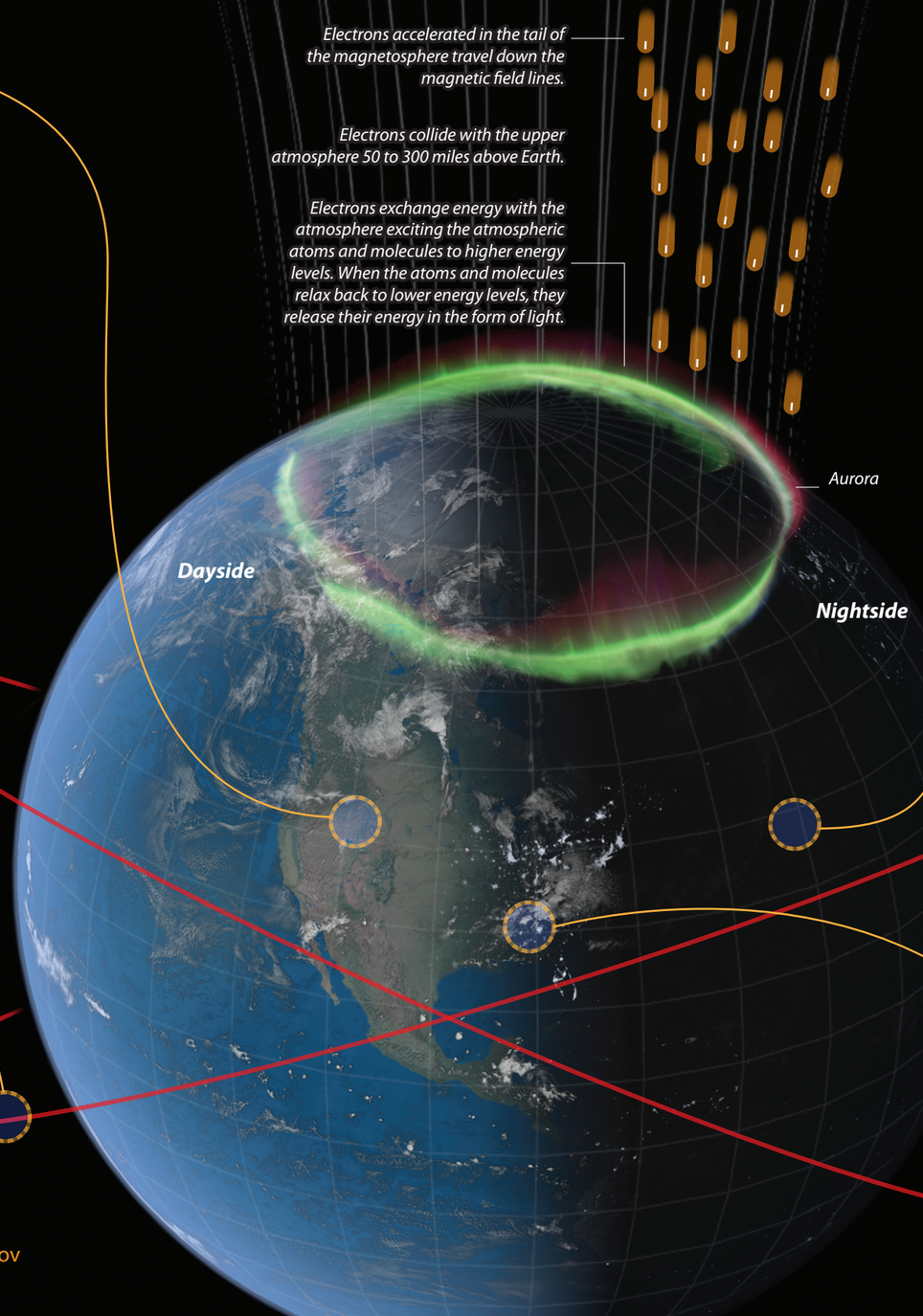
Astronauts and their equipment in space are bombarded with charged particle radiation. This radiation causes tissue or cell damage in humans. Space weather and solar radiation storms are of particular concern for activities outside the protection of Earth's atmosphere and magnetic field.



Electrons accelerated in the tail of the magnetosphere travel down the magnetic field lines.

Electrons collide with the upper atmosphere 50 to 300 miles above Earth.

Electrons exchange energy with the atmosphere exciting the atmospheric atoms and molecules to higher energy levels. When the atoms and molecules relax back to lower energy levels, they release their energy in the form of light.



Aurora

The Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) and Aurora Australis (Southern Lights) are the result of electrons colliding with Earth's upper atmosphere. The electrons are energized through acceleration processes in the downwind tail (nightside) of the magnetosphere. The accelerated electrons follow the magnetic field of Earth down to the polar regions where they collide with oxygen and nitrogen atoms and molecules in Earth's upper atmosphere. In these collisions, the electrons transfer their energy to the atmosphere, thus exciting the atoms and molecules to higher energy states. When they relax back to lower energy states, they release their energy in the form of light. The aurora typically forms 50 to 300 miles above the ground. Earth's magnetic field guides the electrons such that the aurora forms two ovals approximately centered at each magnetic pole.

THE COLORS OF THE AURORA

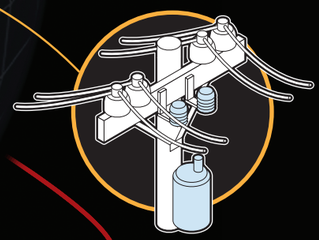
- Deep red from high altitude atomic oxygen
- Magenta from high altitude molecular nitrogen in sunlight
- Greenish yellow from lower altitude atomic oxygen
- Magenta from low altitude molecular nitrogen (not shown in the picture)

Aviation

Aircraft use High Frequency (HF) radio communication to stay in touch with ground controllers in remote areas such as over the oceans or over the poles. Solar flares can "black out" the use of HF on the dayside of Earth and solar radiation storms can "black out" use of HF near the poles, impacting the aircraft's ability to stay in touch with the ground. Impacts to GPS systems can also significantly affect airline operations.

Power Grids

Geomagnetic storms result in electric currents in the magnetosphere and ionosphere as the area shaped by Earth's magnetic field is compressed and disturbed. The disturbed conditions create additional currents in long conductors on the ground such as overhead transmission lines or long pipelines. In the most extreme cases, these currents can cause voltage instability or damage to power system components, potentially resulting in temporary service disruptions, or even a widespread power outage.



NOAA Education www.education.noaa.gov
NOAA Space Weather Prediction Center www.spaceweather.gov

**Image source: Aurora Borealis taken from the International Space Station in April of 2012.*