

The **Balloons and Static Electricity** simulation allows students to flexibly explore static electricity concepts such as transfer of charge, induction, attraction, repulsion, and grounding.

The screenshot shows the simulation interface. On the left, a grey sweater is covered in red '+' and blue '-' charges. A yellow balloon is being rubbed against it. On the right, a green balloon is suspended near a wall also covered in red '+' and blue '-' charges. At the bottom, there are control buttons: 'Show all charges' (selected), 'Show no charges', 'Show charge differences', 'Reset Balloons', and 'Remove Wall'. A 'PHET' logo is in the bottom right corner.

RUB the balloon on the sweater to accumulate charges

VIEW all charges, no charges, or differences

OBSERVE what happens when charged balloon is close to a wall

RETURN balloons to neutral state

EXPLORE phenomena with one or two balloons

Balloons and Static Electricity

Model Simplifications

- The positive and negative charges are meant to give a relative idea of charge. It is important to help students understand that electrons are transferred or relocated, but not the protons.
- Uncharged balloons will stay wherever they are placed. The buoyant force acting on the balloons is intentionally **not modeled** in this simulation, so that students do not conflate the idea of the buoyant force on the balloon with the electric forces on the balloon.
- When the simulation starts up, the balloon is uncharged and has no horizontal forces acting on it. If the uncharged balloon is placed on the wall, it will remain in contact with the wall. However, the balloon is not stuck to the wall. If displaced slightly, the uncharged balloon will not experience attraction to the wall, and as a result will remain where it was placed. Once the balloon is charged, it begins to experience electrical attraction and repulsion, and then its position is determined by the outcome of the forces acting on it.

Insights into Student Use

- During interviews, many students implicitly believed that the balloons were helium-filled (and therefore experienced a buoyant force). To avoid this assumption, the strings holding the balloons have been given a little slack.

Suggestions for Use

Lecture Demo

- Have students rub a balloon on a sweater, and sketch what they think is happening to the charges. Compare to the simulation.

Challenge Prompts

- Predict what happens when a charged balloon is moved closer to the neutral wall. Draw a picture.
- After rubbing the balloon on the sweater, how does the charge on the balloon compare to the charge on the sweater? What happens to the positive charges? What happens to the negative charges? Draw a picture.
- Remove the wall, and use two balloons to explore attraction and repulsion. How do the +/- symbols help you decide whether something attracts or repels?
- Explain how a balloon can be strongly or weakly attracted to the sweater.

See all published activities for Balloons and Static Electricity [here](#).

For more tips on using PhET sims with your students, see [Tips for Using PhET](#).