

THE HEAD-ON COLLISIONS

What is the role of the mass in a head-on collision between two vehicles? What is the role of speed? What is the force produced by each of the two vehicles?

Here are some answers to better understand the mechanism of collisions.

Preamble: Vehicle collisions depend on the linear momentum⁽¹⁾. This specific physical quantity is the product of mass and speed and is expressed in kilogram meters per second (symbol kg.m.s^{-1}). The linear momentums subtract one from the other in case of frontal impact, they add together in case of front-to-back impact.

The linear momentums are used to calculate the residual speed that is the speed just after the collision. This speed is identical for both vehicles when one considers that they have melted into a single mass⁽²⁾.

The comparison between the residual speed and the initial speed is then used to calculate the speed variation.

The speed variation combined with the duration of the collision is used to calculate the deceleration of both vehicles in the event of a frontal impact, or acceleration of the vehicle hit from behind by impact front-rear. This quantity tells the violence of the collision and helps to assess the consequences for passengers.

The duration of the collision is defined as the time during which the car bodies are deformed, this duration being obviously the same for each of the vehicles involved. The duration of the collision depends on many parameters such as the structure of the vehicle, its speed or the nature of the obstacle. Grandeur of course impossible to measure directly, it can be estimated from data collected during crash tests. Here, the value used for calculations is 0.1 second.

Finally, by combining the mass and deceleration, it is possible to calculate the force that is exerted on each vehicle during the collision.

Note: This force is always of equal intensity for each of the two vehicles involved, this is a concrete verification of the principle of action-reaction of Isaac Newton⁽³⁾.

Take this opportunity to recall that, whatever the circumstances, the weight and mass of vehicles, passengers and luggage in a collision remain constant and unchanging quantities.

To estimate the possible consequences of these collisions on passengers, remember these generally accepted values⁽⁴⁾:

- Up to 100 m.s^{-2} , the deceleration is bearable for young passengers, healthy and belted.
- From 150 m.s^{-2} , risk of injury, high risk of internal bleeding.
- Above 200 m.s^{-2} , no chance of survival.

Last precision: the phenomenon of collision does not depend on gravitation. In other words, all other conditions being equal, a collision on the moon would proceed in the same manner and produce the same effects than on the Earth.

Here are the results based on six frontal collision hypotheses. Readers interested in calculating cross-collisions should refer to 'GUIDE DES LOIS PHYSIQUES DE L'AUTOMOBILE'.

1st hypothesis: a head-on collision between two identical cars of 3,300 lb (1,500 kg) mass, both cars traveling at 30 mph (14 m.s⁻¹).

a) residual speed: 0

b) speed variation: 30 mph

c) deceleration: this value is identical for each of the both cars: 140 ms^{-2}

d) forces: $2 \times 210,000 \text{ N}$

Appraisal:

Contrary to the popular belief, the initial speeds do not add up. The intensity of the deceleration is function of the initial speed.

2nd hypothesis: a head-on collision between two identical cars of 3,300 lb (1,500 kg) mass, one traveling at 45 mph (20 m.s⁻¹), the other traveling at 30 mph (14 m.s⁻¹).

a) residual speed: 6.25 mph in the direction of movement of the fastest car.

b) speed variations:

first car speed from +45 to +6.25 mph, second car speed from +30 to -6.25 mph.

c) deceleration:

the value is identical for each of the two cars: 167 m.s^{-2}

d) forces: $2 \times 250,000 \text{ N}$

Appraisal:

Two vehicles of same mass always undergo the same deceleration, their initial speeds being equal or not, which demonstrates that the difference in weight is an inequality factor.

The intensity of the deceleration is function of the higher initial speed (in this example, probable injuries in both cars).

3rd hypothesis: a head-on collision between a 6,600 lb (3,000 kg) truck and a 3,300 lb (1,500 kg) car, both vehicles traveling at 30 mph (14 m.s^{-1}).

a) residual speed: 10.6 mph in the direction of movement of the truck.

b) speed variations:

truck speed from +30 to +10.6 mph, car speed from +30 to -10.6 mph.

c) decelerations:

* truck: 93 m.s^{-2}

* car: 186 m.s^{-2}

d) forces: $2 \times 280,000 \text{ N}$

Appraisal:

The mass difference determines the intensity of the deceleration at the expense of the lightest car.

4th hypothesis: a head-on collision between a 6,600 lb (3,000 kg) truck traveling at 45 mph (20 m.s⁻¹) and a 3,300 lb (1,500 kg) car traveling at 30 mph (14 m.s⁻¹).

a) residual speed: 19 mph in the direction of movement of the truck.

b) speed variations:

truck speed from +45 to +19 mph, car speed from +30 to -19 mph.

c) decelerations:

* truck: 111 m.s⁻²

* car: 222 m.s⁻²

d) forces: 2 x 330,000 N

Appraisal:

The mass difference determines the intensity of the deceleration at the expense of the lightest car.

5th hypothesis: a head-on collision between a 88,000 lb (40,000 kg) truck traveling at 37.5 mph (16.7 m.s⁻¹) and a 3,300 lb (1,500 kg) car traveling at 50 mph (22.2 m.s⁻¹).

a) residual speed: 34 mph in the direction of movement of the truck.

b) speed variations:

truck speed from +37.5 to +34 mph, car speed from +50 to -34mph.

c) decelerations:

* truck: 14 m.s^{-2}

* car: 375 m.s^{-2}

d) forces: $2 \times 560,000 \text{ N}$

6th hypothesis: a front-to-rear collision between a 88,000 lb (40,000 kg) truck travelling at 37.5 mph (16.7 m.s^{-1}) and a 3,300 lb (1,500 kg) car traveling at 50 mph (22.2 m.s^{-1}).

a) residual speed: 38 mph.

b) speed variations:

truck speed from +37.5 to +38 mph, car speed from +50 mph to +38 mph .

c) acceleration or deceleration:

* truck: acceleration 2 m.s^{-2}

* car: deceleration 53 m.s^{-2}

d) forces: $2 \times 80,000 \text{ N}$

Appraisal:

Whether the shock is front or not, the mass difference determines the intensity of the deceleration at the expense of the lightest vehicle.

7th hypothesis: a 6,600 lb (3,000 kg) truck travelling at 30 mph (14 m.s^{-1}) collides with a 3,300 lb (1,500 kg) motionless car.

a) residual speed: 21 mph

b) speed variations:

truck speed from +30 to +21 mph, car speed from 0 to 21 mph.

c) acceleration or deceleration:

* truck: deceleration 47 m.s^{-2}

* car: acceleration 94 m.s^{-2}

d) forces: $2 \times 140,000 \text{ N}$

Appraisal:

Whatever the configuration of the impact (front, side or rear), the difference in mass conditions the intensity of the deceleration experienced by each of the two vehicles, to the detriment of the lightest vehicle.

Conclusion

During a collision, the deceleration intensity is always a function of the initial speed or, in the case of two vehicles with different initial speeds, always depends on the highest initial speed.

In other words, the speed is still an aggravating factor.

Moreover, whatever the parameters and configuration of the collision, the ratio of deceleration experienced by both vehicles is always exactly equal to the ratio of their masses.

In other words, the heaviest vehicle always dictates its law to the lighter one.

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Notes

(1) *The momentum is a vector quantity with a spatial orientation. In other words, it can be represented by an arrow (length, direction). This is not the case with kinetic energy, which is a scalar quantity and can only be represented by a number.*

(2) *A collision of this type, sometimes referred to as soft or inelastic, is characterized by a deformation of the structure, in other words by a work that corresponds to the variation of kinetic energy of the car. In the absence of deformation, a collision is called hard or elastic, it is characterized by a rebound and obeys other laws.*

(3) *Third Isaac Newton's principle, or principle of action-reaction: 'Any force acting on a body causes a reaction of equal intensity but opposite reaction.' Caution: equal intensity does not mean equal effect, which depends on the mass, (second Newton's principle). See other applications of this principle in ADILCA the folders devoted to different forces.*

(4) *The values shown here are average decelerations, not maximum ones. Moreover, in case of collision, the belted occupants of a car undergo a deceleration lower than that of the car, provided to benefit from the deformation of the structure (sheet metal engine compartment or trunk).*

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RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PHYSICAL QUANTITIES

Linear Momentum

$$Q = M \cdot V$$

Q: linear momentum, expressed in **kg.m.s⁻¹**

M: mass, expressed in **kg**

V: speed, expressed in **m.s⁻¹**

consistency of units: $Q = \text{kg} \cdot \text{m.s}^{-1} = \text{kg.m.s}^{-1}$

Example: calculate the linear momentum of a 1,500 kg (3,300 lb) mass traveling at 20 m.s⁻¹ (45 mph):

$$Q = 1,500 \times 20 = 30,000 \text{ kg.m.s}^{-1}$$

Residual speed after a head-on collision

$$V = (Q1 - Q2) / (M1 + M2)$$

V: residual speed, expressed in **m.s⁻¹**

Q1: 1st vehicle linear momentum, expressed in **kg.m.s⁻¹**

Q2: 2nd vehicle linear momentum, expressed in **kg.m.s⁻¹**

M1: 1st vehicle mass, expressed in **kg**

M2: 2nd vehicle mass, expressed in **kg**

consistency of units: $V = \text{kg.m.s}^{-1} \cdot \text{kg}^{-1} = \text{m.s}^{-1}$

Example: calculate the residual speed after a head-on collision between two cars, one is a 1,500 kg (3,300 lb) mass car traveling at 20 m.s⁻¹ (45 mph), the other is a 1,000 kg (2,200 lb) mass car traveling at 15 m.s⁻¹ (30 mph):

$$V = (30,000 - 15,000) / (1,500 + 1,000) = 15,000 / 2,500 = 6 \text{ m.s}^{-1} \text{ (13.5 mph)}$$

Residual speed after a collision of two vehicles traveling in the same direction

$$V = (Q1 + Q2) / (M1 + M2)$$

V: residual speed, expressed in **m.s⁻¹**

Q1: 1st vehicle linear momentum, expressed in **kg.m.s⁻¹**

Q2: 2nd vehicle linear momentum, expressed in **kg.m.s⁻¹**

M1: 1st vehicle mass, expressed in **kg**

M2: 2nd vehicle mass, expressed in **kg**

consistency of the units: **V** = kg.m.s⁻¹ . kg⁻¹ = **m.s⁻¹**

Example: calculate the residual speed after a collision between two cars traveling in the same direction, one is a 1,000 kg (2,200 lb) mass traveling at 15 m.s⁻¹ (30 mph), the other is a 1,500 kg (3,300 lb) mass traveling at 20 m.s⁻¹ (45 mph):

$$V = (15,000 + 30,000) / (1,000 + 1,500) = 45,000 / 2,500 = 18 \text{ m.s}^{-1} \text{ (40 mph)}$$

Deceleration

$$Y = \Delta V / T$$

Y: deceleration, expressed in **m.s⁻²**

ΔV: speed variation, expressed in **m.s⁻¹**

T: duration, expressed in **s**

consistency of units: **Y** = m.s⁻¹ . s⁻¹ = **m.s⁻²**

Example: calculate the deceleration of a car having undergone a speed variation of 2 m.s⁻¹ during 0.1 s:

$$Y = 2 / 0.1 = 20 \text{ m.s}^{-2}$$

Force

$$F = M . Y$$

F: force, expressed in **N**

M: mass, expressed in **kg**

Y: deceleration, expressed in **m.s⁻²**

consistency of units: **F** = kg . m.s⁻² = **N**

Example: calculate the force that is exerted on a 1,500 kg (3,300 lb) mass car undergoing a deceleration of 20 m.s^{-2} :

$$F = 1,500 \times 20 = 30,000 \text{ N}$$

A force of the same intensity was exerted on the other car.

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