

# Understanding Net Positive Suction Head

## Atmospheric Pressure

Until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century air was largely misunderstood. Evangelista Torricelli, an Italian scientist, was one of the first to discover that air, like water, has weight. He once said, “We live submerged at the bottom of an ocean of the element air.” The weight of this “ocean” of air exerts a force on the Earth’s surface called atmospheric pressure. Torricelli went on to develop the mercury barometer which now allowed for quantifiable measurement of this pressure.

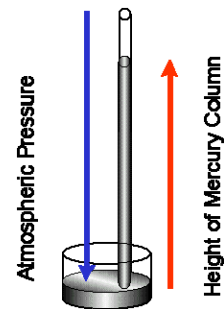


Figure 1  
Operation of a  
mercury barometer

A mercury barometer (*figure 1*) uses a complete vacuum at the top of a glass tube to draw mercury up the tube. The weight of the column of mercury is equal to the weight of the air outside the tube (the atmospheric pressure). For this reason, atmospheric pressure is often measured in mmHg or inHg, corresponding to the height of the mercury column. This atmospheric pressure controls the weather, enables you to breathe, and is the cornerstone of pump operation.

## Pump Operation

When asked how a pump operates, most reply that it “sucks.” While not a false statement, it’s easy to see why so many pump operators still struggle with pump problems. Fluid flows from areas of high pressure to areas of low pressure. Pumps operate by creating low pressure at the inlet which allows the liquid to be pushed into the pump by atmospheric or head pressure (pressure due to the liquid’s surface being above the centerline of the pump). Consider placing a pump at the top of the mercury barometer above: Even with a perfect vacuum at the pump inlet, atmospheric pressure limits how high the pump can lift the liquid. With liquids lighter than mercury, this lift height can increase, but there’s still a physical limit to pump operation based on pressure external to the pump. This limit is the key consideration for Net Positive Suction Head.

## Net Positive Suction Head (NPSH)

NPSH can be defined as two parts:

NPSH Available ( $NPSH_A$ ): The absolute pressure at the suction port of the pump.

AND

NPSH Required ( $NPSH_R$ ): The minimum pressure required at the suction port of the pump to keep the pump from cavitating.

$NPSH_A$  is a function of your system and must be calculated, whereas  $NPSH_R$  is a function of the pump and must be provided by the pump manufacturer.  $NPSH_A$  MUST be greater than  $NPSH_R$  for the pump system to operate without cavitating. Put another way, you must have more suction side pressure *available* than the pump *requires*.

## Vapor Pressure and Cavitation

To understand Cavitation, you must first understand vapor pressure. Vapor pressure is the pressure required to boil a liquid at a given temperature. Soda water is a good example of a high vapor pressure liquid. Even at room temperature the carbon dioxide entrained in the soda is released. In a closed container, the soda is pressurized, keeping the vapor entrained.

Temperature affects vapor pressure as well (figure 2). A chilled bottle of soda has a lower vapor pressure than a warm bottle (as anyone who's opened a warm bottle of root beer has probably already figured out). Water, as another example, will not boil at room temperature since its vapor pressure is lower than the surrounding atmospheric pressure. But, raise the water's temperature to 212°F and the vapors are released because at that increased temperature the vapor pressure is greater than the atmospheric pressure.

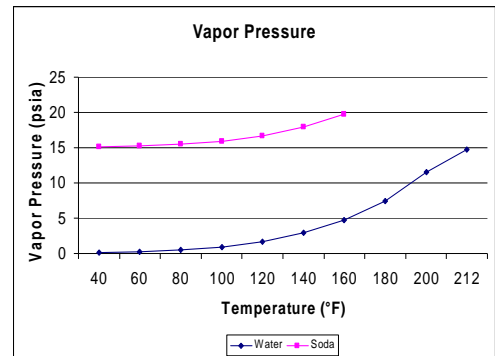


Figure 2  
Vapor Pressure  
versus Temperature

Pump cavitation occurs when the pressure in the pump inlet drops below the vapor pressure of the liquid. Vapor bubbles form at the inlet of the pump and are moved to the discharge of the pump where they collapse, often taking small pieces of the pump with them. Cavitation is often characterized by:

- Loud noise often described as a grinding or “marbles” in the pump
- Loss of capacity (bubbles are now taking up space where liquid should be)
- Pitting damage to parts as material is removed by the collapsing bubbles

Noise is a nuisance and lower flows will slow your process, but pitting damage will ultimately decrease the life of the pump. Figure 3 shows an idler gear from an internal gear pump that has suffered cavitation (note the pitting along the roots and the tips of the gear). Often this is mistaken for corrosion, but unlike corrosion, the pitting is isolated within the pump (corrosion attacks the pump material throughout).

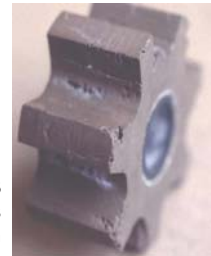


Figure 3  
An idler gear which has  
pitting due to cavitation

## Calculating $NPSH_A$

No engineer wants to be responsible for installing a noisy, slow, damaged pump. It's critical to get the  $NPSH_R$  value from the pump manufacturer AND to insure that your  $NPSH_A$  pressure will be adequate to cover that requirement.

The formula for calculating NPSH<sub>A</sub>:

$$NPSH_A = H_A \pm H_Z - H_F + H_V - H_{VP}$$

Term	Definition	Notes
H <sub>A</sub>	The absolute pressure on the surface of the liquid in the supply tank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Typically atmospheric pressure (vented supply tank), but can be different for closed tanks.</li> <li>Don't forget that altitude affects atmospheric pressure (H<sub>A</sub> in Denver, CO will be lower than in Miami, FL).</li> <li><u>Always</u> positive (may be low, but even vacuum vessels are at a positive <u>absolute</u> pressure)</li> </ul>
H <sub>Z</sub>	The vertical distance between the surface of the liquid in the supply tank and the centerline of the pump	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be positive when liquid level is above the centerline of the pump (called static head)</li> <li>Can be negative when liquid level is below the centerline of the pump (called suction lift)</li> <li>Always be sure to use the lowest liquid level allowed in the tank.</li> </ul>
H <sub>F</sub>	Friction losses in the suction piping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Piping and fittings act as a restriction, working against liquid as it flows towards the pump inlet.</li> </ul>
H <sub>V</sub>	Velocity head at the pump suction port	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Often not included as it's normally quite small.</li> </ul>
H <sub>VP</sub>	Absolute vapor pressure of the liquid at the pumping temperature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Must be subtracted in the end to make sure that the inlet pressure stays above the vapor pressure.</li> <li>Remember, as temperature goes up, so does the vapor pressure.</li> </ul>

All too often, these calculations are faulted by a simple unit discrepancy. Most often, it's easiest to work with feet of liquid. Adding the liquid name helps to be clear as well (feet of water, feet of gasoline, feet of ammonia, etc.). Also, make sure to include the specific gravity of the liquid. As discussed above, a 10" column of mercury and a 10" column of water exert very different pressures at their base.

## Solving NPSH Problems

Let's be honest, many of us don't begin reading documents like this until after there's a problem. It would be wonderful if proper NPSH calculations had been run for every pump installation, but for thousands of cavitating pumps out there it's not too late.

The first step is to diagnose the pump. As discussed above, noise, capacity loss, and pitting are three major indicators, but direct measurement not only helps to confirm your suspicions, but also let's you know what your true NPSH<sub>A</sub> is. Install a compound gauge (one that measures both vacuum pressures as well as light positive gauge pressures) (*figure 4*) into the suction port of the pump (or as close as you can in the suction piping). When the pump is running, the reading from this gauge will be equal to your NPSH<sub>A</sub>, less vapor pressure. If after subtracting vapor pressure this value is less than the pump's NPSH<sub>R</sub>, you have confirmed that this is a cavitation problem.



Figure 4  
A Compound  
Pressure Gauge

Diagnosing the problem is the easy part. Fixing the problem is usually much more difficult. Step by step, look at which of the  $NPSH_A$  factors can be improved:

Term	Improvements
$H_A$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Though you may use external pressure to feed the pump, this is usually atmospheric pressure and outside of your control.</li> </ul>
$H_Z$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If the pump only starts to cavitate near the end of emptying the supply tank, you may consider allowing for a higher level of liquid to remain.</li> <li>Raising the tank, or lowering the pump helps, but may not be feasible.</li> </ul>
$H_F$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This factor is often the easiest to change. You can cut your frictional losses by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increasing the size of the suction piping or decreasing the length</li> <li>- Reducing obstructions such as valves, strainers, and other fittings.</li> <li>- For thicker liquids, heat tracing the lines will help to reduce the viscous losses</li> <li>- Hoses and corroded pipes have high losses. Consider replacing with new pipe</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
$H_{VP}$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Control the temperature to make sure the vapor pressure doesn't get too high. Often tanks and pipes holding high vapor pressure liquids are painted light colors to avoid the sun heating them and raising the vapor pressure.</li> </ul>

If system changes aren't feasible or aren't adequate to increase the  $NPSH_A$ , consult with the pump manufacturer about reducing the  $NPSH_R$ . In the case of a positive displacement pump, this will likely mean going with a larger model and slowing it down. For example, a gear pump generating 100 GPM at 780 RPM has an  $NPSH_R$  of 9.1 feet of water. By switching to a larger pump running at 350 RPM to generate the same 100 GPM, the  $NPSH_R$  drops to 3.8 feet of water. Slowing the pump allows more time for the tooth cavities to fill, allowing the pump to operate without cavitating even at low suction pressures (figure 5).

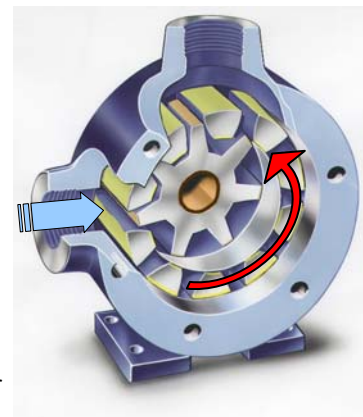


Figure 5  
Internal Gear  
Pump

## Just the Beginning

Hopefully you now feel more knowledgeable regarding NPSH and its importance when selecting a pump. A basic understanding can go a long way in identifying potential problems before they occur. Lifting liquids from underground tanks or rail cars, pulling thick liquids long distances or through hoses, handling high vapor pressure liquids such as LP gas or alcohol...these are just a few example cases of applications which pose the maximum risk of failure for the engineer who does not understand or account for NPSH.



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