



What is an Actuator?

Put simply, an actuator is something that converts energy into motion. It can also be used to apply a force. An actuator typically is a mechanical device that takes energy, usually created by air, electricity, or liquid, and converts that into some kind of motion. That motion can be anything from blocking to clamping to ejecting. Actuators are typically used in manufacturing or industrial applications and may be used in things like motors, pumps, switches, and valves.

Perhaps the most common type of actuator is powered by air — the pneumatic cylinder, also known as the air cylinder. Air cylinders are air-tight cylinders, typically made from metal, that use the energy of compressed air to move a piston. Air cylinders are most commonly used in manufacturing and assembly processes. Grippers, which are used in robotics, use actuators driven by compressed air to work much like human fingers.

Actuators can also be powered by electricity or hydraulics. Much like there are air cylinders, there are also electric cylinders and hydraulic cylinders where the cylinder converts electricity or hydraulics into motion. Hydraulic cylinders are often used in certain types of vehicles.

Many actuators have more than one type of power source. Solenoid valves, for example, can be powered by air *and* electricity. Electricity powers the solenoid, and the solenoid, powered by air, actuates the valve. Alternatively, the solenoid can be powered by hydraulics and electricity.

Actuators can create a linear motion, rotary motion, or oscillatory motion. That is, they can create motion in one direction, in a circular motion, or in opposite directions at regular intervals. Hydraulic and air cylinders can be classified as single acting, meaning that the energy source causes movement in one direction and a spring is used for the other direction. Alternatively, these cylinders can be double acting cylinders, meaning the energy is used in two directions.

While actuators are typically discussed in terms of mechanical implements, muscles are sometimes given as an example of an actuator. Energy (e.g., created by eating carbohydrates) is converted by the muscle (i.e., the actuator) into motion (e.g., kicking a ball).