

Cirrus Clouds

thin and wispy

WW2010
welcome
online guides
archives
educational cd-rom
current weather
about ww2010
index

Online Guides
introduction
meteorology
remote sensing
reading maps
projects, activities

Meteorology
introduction
air masses, fronts
clouds, precipitation
el nino
forces, winds
hurricanes
hydrologic cycle
light, optics
midlatitude cyclones
severe storms
weather forecasting

Clouds, Precipitation
introduction
development
cloud types
precipitation

Cloud Types
introduction
high-level clouds
mid-level clouds
low-level clouds
vertically developed
other cloud types

High-Level Clouds
cirrus
cirrostratus

User Interface
graphics text

The most common form of high-level clouds are thin and often wispy cirrus clouds. Typically found at heights greater than 20,000 feet (6,000 meters), cirrus clouds are composed of ice crystals that originate from the freezing of supercooled water droplets. Cirrus generally occur in fair weather and point in the direction of air movement at their elevation.



Cirrus can form from almost any cloud that has undergone [glaciation](#) and can be observed in a variety of shapes and sizes. Possibilities range from the "finger-like" appearance of cirrus fall streaks to the uniform texture of more extensive cirrus clouds associated with an approaching [warm front](#).



Photograph by: [Holle](#)

Fall streaks form when snowflakes and ice crystals fall from cirrus clouds. The change in wind with height and how quickly these ice crystals fall determine the shapes and sizes the fall streaks attain. Since ice crystals fall much more slowly than raindrops, fall streaks tend to be stretched out horizontally as well as vertically. Cirrus streaks may be nearly straight, shaped like a comma, or seemingly all tangled together.

Similar to fall streaks is [virga](#), which appears as streamers suspended in the air beneath the base of precipitating clouds. Virga develops when precipitation falls through a layer of dry air and evaporates before reaching the ground.



Cloud Types

[Terms](#) for using data resources. [CD-ROM](#) available.

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cirrostratus