3.2

13.1 VECTOR FUNCTIONS AND SPACE CURVES

In general, a function is a rule that assigns to each element in the domain an element in the range. A **vector-valued function**, or **vector function**, is simply a function whose domain is a set of real numbers and whose range is a set of vectors. We are most interested in vector functions $\mathbf{r}$ whose values are three-dimensional vectors. This means that for every number t in the domain of $\mathbf{r}$ there is a unique vector in V_3 denoted by $\mathbf{r}(t)$. If $f(t)$, $g(t)$, and $h(t)$ are the components of the vector $\mathbf{r}(t)$, then f, g, and h are real-valued functions called the **component functions** of $\mathbf{r}$ and we can write

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle f(t), g(t), h(t)\rangle = f(t)\,\mathbf{i} + g(t)\,\mathbf{j} + h(t)\,\mathbf{k}$$

We usually use the letter t to denote the independent variable because it represents time in most applications of vector functions.

EXAMPLE 1 If

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = \left\langle t^3, \ln(3 - t), \sqrt{t}\right\rangle$$

then the component functions are

$$f(t) = t^3 \qquad g(t) = \ln(3 - t) \qquad h(t) = \sqrt{t}$$

By our usual convention, the domain of $\mathbf{r}$ consists of all values of t for which the expression for $\mathbf{r}(t)$ is defined. The expressions t^3, $\ln(3 - t)$, and $\sqrt{t}$ are all defined when $3 - t > 0$ and $t \geqslant 0$. Therefore the domain of $\mathbf{r}$ is the interval $[0, 3)$. □

The **limit** of a vector function $\mathbf{r}$ is defined by taking the limits of its component functions as follows.

If $\lim_{t\to a}\mathbf{r}(t) = \mathbf{L}$, this definition is equivalent to saying that the length and direction of the vector $\mathbf{r}(t)$ approach the length and direction of the vector $\mathbf{L}$.

1 If $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle f(t), g(t), h(t)\rangle$, then

$$\lim_{t\to a}\mathbf{r}(t) = \left\langle \lim_{t\to a} f(t), \lim_{t\to a} g(t), \lim_{t\to a} h(t)\right\rangle$$

provided the limits of the component functions exist.

Equivalently, we could have used an ε-δ definition (see Exercise 45). Limits of vector functions obey the same rules as limits of real-valued functions (see Exercise 43).

EXAMPLE 2 Find $\lim_{t\to 0}\mathbf{r}(t)$, where $\mathbf{r}(t) = (1 + t^3)\,\mathbf{i} + te^{-t}\,\mathbf{j} + \dfrac{\sin t}{t}\,\mathbf{k}$.

SOLUTION According to Definition 1, the limit of $\mathbf{r}$ is the vector whose components are the limits of the component functions of $\mathbf{r}$:

$$\lim_{t\to 0}\mathbf{r}(t) = \left[\lim_{t\to 0}(1 + t^3)\right]\mathbf{i} + \left[\lim_{t\to 0} te^{-t}\right]\mathbf{j} + \left[\lim_{t\to 0}\frac{\sin t}{t}\right]\mathbf{k}$$

$$= \mathbf{i} + \mathbf{k} \qquad \text{(by Equation 3.3.2)}$$ □

A vector function $\mathbf{r}$ is **continuous at a** if

$$\lim_{t \to a} \mathbf{r}(t) = \mathbf{r}(a)$$

In view of Definition 1, we see that $\mathbf{r}$ is continuous at a if and only if its component functions f, g, and h are continuous at a.

There is a close connection between continuous vector functions and space curves. Suppose that f, g, and h are continuous real-valued functions on an interval I. Then the set C of all points (x, y, z) in space, where

$$\boxed{2} \qquad x = f(t) \qquad y = g(t) \qquad z = h(t)$$

and t varies throughout the interval I, is called a **space curve**. The equations in (2) are called **parametric equations of C** and t is called a **parameter**. We can think of C as being traced out by a moving particle whose position at time t is $(f(t), g(t), h(t))$. If we now consider the vector function $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle f(t), g(t), h(t) \rangle$, then $\mathbf{r}(t)$ is the position vector of the point $P(f(t), g(t), h(t))$ on C. Thus any continuous vector function $\mathbf{r}$ defines a space curve C that is traced out by the tip of the moving vector $\mathbf{r}(t)$, as shown in Figure 1.

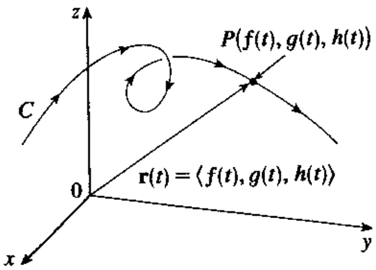


FIGURE 1
C is traced out by the tip of a moving position vector $\mathbf{r}(t)$.

V EXAMPLE 3 Describe the curve defined by the vector function

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle 1 + t, 2 + 5t, -1 + 6t \rangle$$

TEC Visual 13.1A shows several curves being traced out by position vectors, including those in Figures 1 and 2.

SOLUTION The corresponding parametric equations are

$$x = 1 + t \qquad y = 2 + 5t \qquad z = -1 + 6t$$

which we recognize from Equations 12.5.2 as parametric equations of a line passing through the point $(1, 2, -1)$ and parallel to the vector $\langle 1, 5, 6 \rangle$. Alternatively, we could observe that the function can be written as $\mathbf{r} = \mathbf{r}_0 + t\mathbf{v}$, where $\mathbf{r}_0 = \langle 1, 2, -1 \rangle$ and $\mathbf{v} = \langle 1, 5, 6 \rangle$, and this is the vector equation of a line as given by Equation 12.5.1. □

Plane curves can also be represented in vector notation. For instance, the curve given by the parametric equations $x = t^2 - 2t$ and $y = t + 1$ (see Example 1 in Section 10.1) could also be described by the vector equation

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle t^2 - 2t, t + 1 \rangle = (t^2 - 2t)\,\mathbf{i} + (t + 1)\,\mathbf{j}$$

where $\mathbf{i} = \langle 1, 0 \rangle$ and $\mathbf{j} = \langle 0, 1 \rangle$.

V EXAMPLE 4 Sketch the curve whose vector equation is

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = \cos t\,\mathbf{i} + \sin t\,\mathbf{j} + t\,\mathbf{k}$$

SOLUTION The parametric equations for this curve are

$$x = \cos t \qquad y = \sin t \qquad z = t$$

Since $x^2 + y^2 = \cos^2 t + \sin^2 t = 1$, the curve must lie on the circular cylinder $x^2 + y^2 = 1$. The point (x, y, z) lies directly above the point $(x, y, 0)$, which moves counterclockwise around the circle $x^2 + y^2 = 1$ in the xy-plane. (See Example 2 in Section 10.1.) Since $z = t$, the curve spirals upward around the cylinder as t increases. The curve, shown in Figure 2, is called a **helix**. □

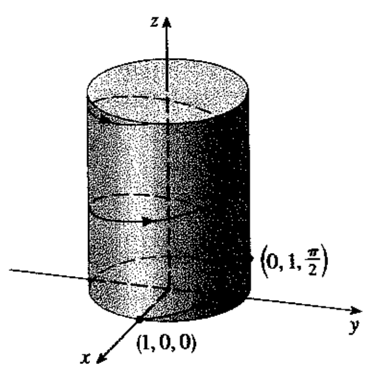


FIGURE 2

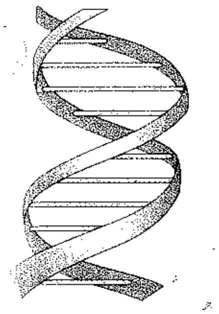


FIGURE 3

The corkscrew shape of the helix in Example 4 is familiar from its occurrence in coiled springs. It also occurs in the model of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid, the genetic material of living cells). In 1953 James Watson and Francis Crick showed that the structure of the DNA molecule is that of two linked, parallel helixes that are intertwined as in Figure 3.

In Examples 3 and 4 we were given vector equations of curves and asked for a geometric description or sketch. In the next two examples we are given a geometric description of a curve and are asked to find parametric equations for the curve.

EXAMPLE 5 Find a vector equation and parametric equations for the line segment that joins the point $P(1, 3, -2)$ to the point $Q(2, -1, 3)$.

Figure 4 shows the line segment PQ in Example 5.

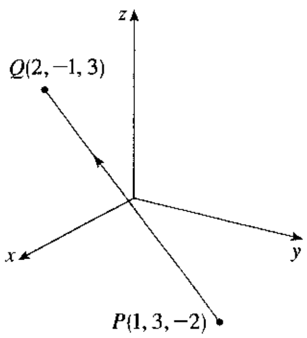


FIGURE 4

SOLUTION In Section 12.5 we found a vector equation for the line segment that joins the tip of the vector $\mathbf{r}_0$ to the tip of the vector $\mathbf{r}_1$:

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = (1 - t)\mathbf{r}_0 + t\mathbf{r}_1 \qquad 0 \leqslant t \leqslant 1$$

(See Equation 12.5.4.) Here we take $\mathbf{r}_0 = \langle 1, 3, -2 \rangle$ and $\mathbf{r}_1 = \langle 2, -1, 3 \rangle$ to obtain a vector equation of the line segment from P to Q:

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = (1 - t)\langle 1, 3, -2 \rangle + t\langle 2, -1, 3 \rangle \qquad 0 \leqslant t \leqslant 1$$

or

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle 1 + t, 3 - 4t, -2 + 5t \rangle \qquad 0 \leqslant t \leqslant 1$$

The corresponding parametric equations are

$$x = 1 + t \qquad y = 3 - 4t \qquad z = -2 + 5t \qquad 0 \leqslant t \leqslant 1$$ □

EXAMPLE 6 Find a vector function that represents the curve of intersection of the cylinder $x^2 + y^2 = 1$ and the plane $y + z = 2$.

SOLUTION Figure 5 shows how the plane and the cylinder intersect, and Figure 6 shows the curve of intersection C, which is an ellipse.

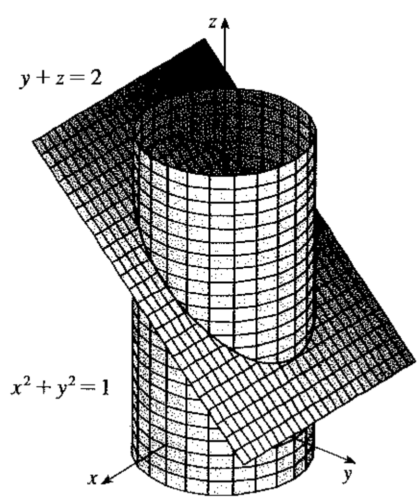


FIGURE 5

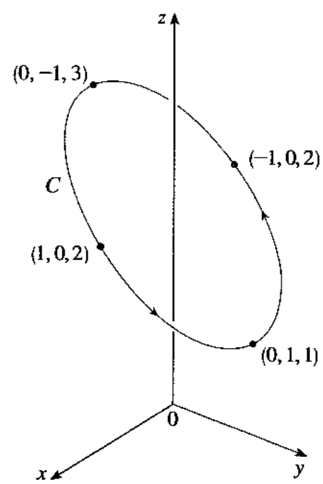


FIGURE 6

The projection of C onto the xy-plane is the circle $x^2 + y^2 = 1, z = 0$. So we know from Example 2 in Section 10.1 that we can write

$$x = \cos t \qquad y = \sin t \qquad 0 \leqslant t \leqslant 2\pi$$

From the equation of the plane, we have

$$z = 2 - y = 2 - \sin t$$

So we can write parametric equations for C as

$$x = \cos t \qquad y = \sin t \qquad z = 2 - \sin t \qquad 0 \leqslant t \leqslant 2\pi$$

The corresponding vector equation is

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = \cos t\,\mathbf{i} + \sin t\,\mathbf{j} + (2 - \sin t)\,\mathbf{k} \qquad 0 \leqslant t \leqslant 2\pi$$

This equation is called a *parametrization* of the curve C. The arrows in Figure 6 indicate the direction in which C is traced as the parameter t increases. □

USING COMPUTERS TO DRAW SPACE CURVES

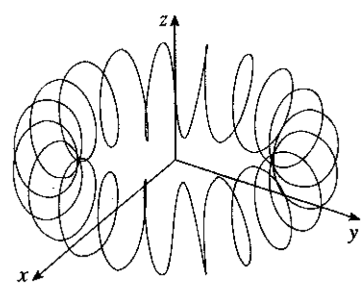


FIGURE 7 A toroidal spiral

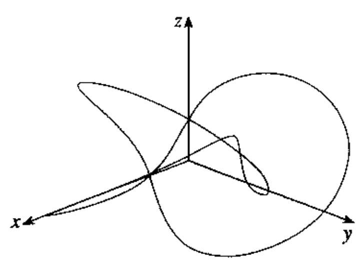


FIGURE 8 A trefoil knot

Space curves are inherently more difficult to draw by hand than plane curves; for an accurate representation we need to use technology. For instance, Figure 7 shows a computer-generated graph of the curve with parametric equations

$$x = (4 + \sin 20t)\cos t \qquad y = (4 + \sin 20t)\sin t \qquad z = \cos 20t$$

It's called a **toroidal spiral** because it lies on a torus. Another interesting curve, the **trefoil knot**, with equations

$$x = (2 + \cos 1.5t)\cos t \qquad y = (2 + \cos 1.5t)\sin t \qquad z = \sin 1.5t$$

is graphed in Figure 8. It wouldn't be easy to plot either of these curves by hand.

Even when a computer is used to draw a space curve, optical illusions make it difficult to get a good impression of what the curve really looks like. (This is especially true in Figure 8. See Exercise 44.) The next example shows how to cope with this problem.

EXAMPLE 7 Use a computer to draw the curve with vector equation $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle t, t^2, t^3 \rangle$. This curve is called a **twisted cubic.**

SOLUTION We start by using the computer to plot the curve with parametric equations $x = t$, $y = t^2$, $z = t^3$ for $-2 \leqslant t \leqslant 2$. The result is shown in Figure 9(a), but it's hard to see the true nature of the curve from that graph alone. Most three-dimensional computer graphing programs allow the user to enclose a curve or surface in a box instead of displaying the coordinate axes. When we look at the same curve in a box in Figure 9(b), we have a much clearer picture of the curve. We can see that it climbs from a lower corner of the box to the upper corner nearest us, and it twists as it climbs.

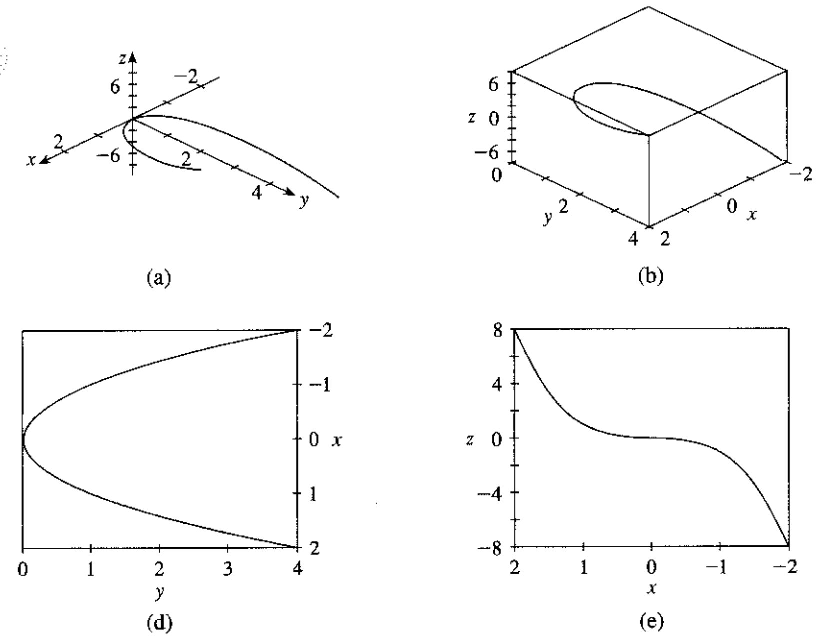


FIGURE 9 Views of the twisted cubic

TEC In Visual 13.1B you can rotate the box in Figure 9 to see the curve from any viewpoint.

We get an even better idea of the curve when we view it from different vantage points. Part (c) shows the result of rotating the box to give another viewpoint. Parts (d), (e), and (f) show the views we get when we look directly at a face of the box. In particular, part (d) shows the view from directly above the box. It is the projection of the curve on the xy-plane, namely, the parabola $y = x^2$. Part (e) shows the projection on the xz-plane, the cubic curve $z = x^3$. It's now obvious why the given curve is called a twisted cubic. □

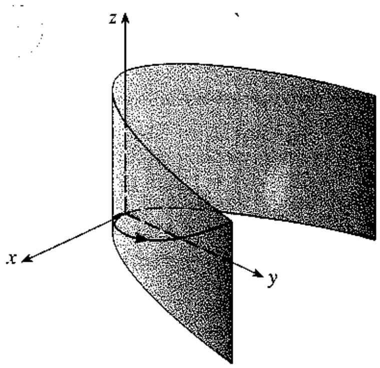


FIGURE 10

Another method of visualizing a space curve is to draw it on a surface. For instance, the twisted cubic in Example 7 lies on the parabolic cylinder $y = x^2$. (Eliminate the parameter from the first two parametric equations, $x = t$ and $y = t^2$.) Figure 10 shows both the cylinder and the twisted cubic, and we see that the curve moves upward from the origin along the surface of the cylinder. We also used this method in Example 4 to visualize the helix lying on the circular cylinder (see Figure 2).

A third method for visualizing the twisted cubic is to realize that it also lies on the cylinder $z = x^3$. So it can be viewed as the curve of intersection of the cylinders $y = x^2$ and $z = x^3$. (See Figure 11.)

TEC Visual 13.1C shows how curves arise as intersections of surfaces.

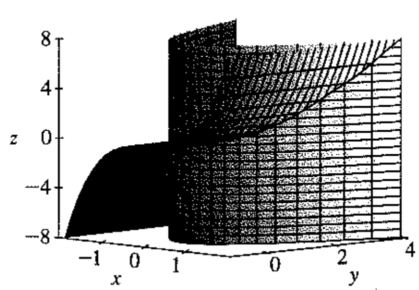
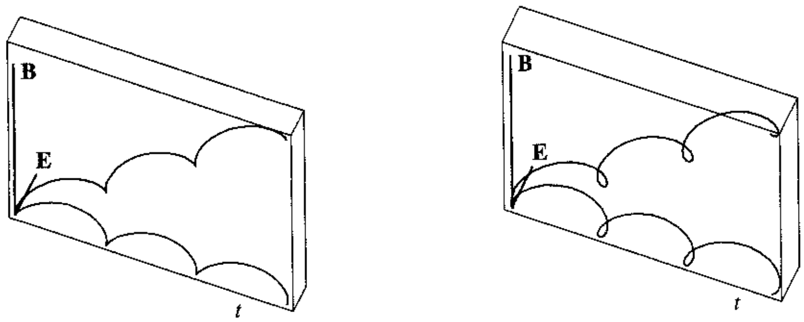


FIGURE 11

Some computer algebra systems provide us with a clearer picture of a space curve by enclosing it in a tube. Such a plot enables us to see whether one part of a curve passes in front of or behind another part of the curve. For example, Figure 13 shows the curve of Figure 12(b) as rendered by the `tubeplot` command in Maple.

We have seen that an interesting space curve, the helix, occurs in the model of DNA. Another notable example of a space curve in science is the trajectory of a positively charged particle in orthogonally oriented electric and magnetic fields **E** and **B**. Depending on the initial velocity given the particle at the origin, the path of the particle is either a space curve whose projection on the horizontal plane is the cycloid we studied in Section 10.1 [Figure 12(a)] or a curve whose projection is the trochoid investigated in Exercise 40 in Section 10.1 [Figure 12(b)].



(a) $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle t - \sin t, 1 - \cos t, t \rangle$

(b) $\mathbf{r}(t) = \left\langle t - \frac{3}{2}\sin t, 1 - \frac{3}{2}\cos t, t \right\rangle$

FIGURE 12
Motion of a charged particle in orthogonally oriented electric and magnetic fields

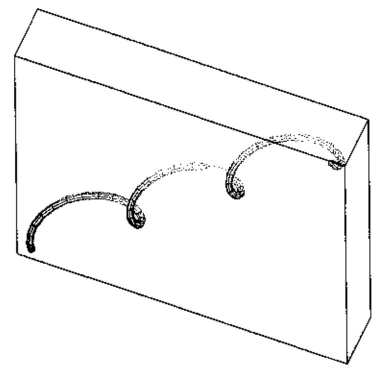


FIGURE 13

For further details concerning the physics involved and animations of the trajectories of the particles, see the following websites:

- www.phy.ntnu.edu.tw/java/emField/emField.html
- www.physics.ucla.edu/plasma-exp/Beam/

13.1 EXERCISES

1–2 Find the domain of the vector function.

1. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \left\langle \sqrt{4 - t^2}, e^{-3t}, \ln(t + 1) \right\rangle$

2. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \dfrac{t - 2}{t + 2}\mathbf{i} + \sin t\,\mathbf{j} + \ln(9 - t^2)\,\mathbf{k}$

3–6 Find the limit.

3. $\lim_{t \to 0^+} \langle \cos t, \sin t, t \ln t \rangle$

4. $\lim_{t \to 0} \left\langle \dfrac{e^t - 1}{t}, \dfrac{\sqrt{1 + t} - 1}{t}, \dfrac{3}{1 + t} \right\rangle$

5. $\lim_{t \to 0} \left(e^{-3t}\mathbf{i} + \dfrac{t^2}{\sin^2 t}\mathbf{j} + \cos 2t\,\mathbf{k} \right)$

6. $\lim_{t \to \infty} \left\langle \arctan t, e^{-2t}, \dfrac{\ln t}{t} \right\rangle$

7–14 Sketch the curve with the given vector equation. Indicate with an arrow the direction in which t increases.

7. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle \sin t, t \rangle$

8. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle t^3, t^2 \rangle$

9. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle t, \cos 2t, \sin 2t \rangle$

10. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle 1 + t, 3t, -t \rangle$

11. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle 1, \cos t, 2 \sin t \rangle$

12. $\mathbf{r}(t) = t^2\mathbf{i} + t\mathbf{j} + 2\mathbf{k}$

13. $\mathbf{r}(t) = t^2\mathbf{i} + t^4\mathbf{j} + t^6\mathbf{k}$

14. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \cos t\,\mathbf{i} - \cos t\,\mathbf{j} + \sin t\,\mathbf{k}$

15–18 Find a vector equation and parametric equations for the line segment that joins P to Q.

15. $P(0, 0, 0)$, $Q(1, 2, 3)$

16. $P(1, 0, 1)$, $Q(2, 3, 1)$

17. $P(1, -1, 2)$, $Q(4, 1, 7)$

18. $P(-2, 4, 0)$, $Q(6, -1, 2)$

19–24 Match the parametric equations with the graphs (labeled I–VI). Give reasons for your choices.

19. $x = \cos 4t$, $y = t$, $z = \sin 4t$

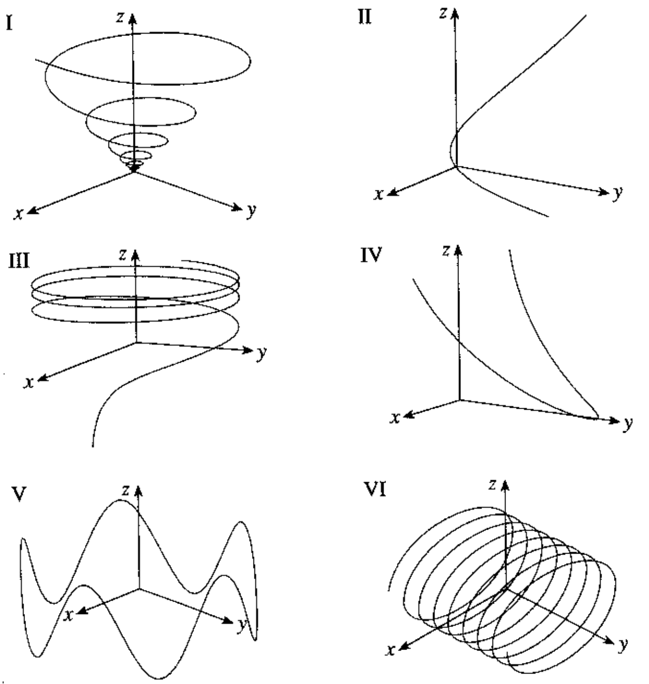
20. $x = t$, $y = t^2$, $z = e^{-t}$

21. $x = t, \quad y = 1/(1 + t^2), \quad z = t^2$

22. $x = e^{-t} \cos 10t, \quad y = e^{-t} \sin 10t, \quad z = e^{-t}$

23. $x = \cos t, \quad y = \sin t, \quad z = \sin 5t$

24. $x = \cos t, \quad y = \sin t, \quad z = \ln t$



25. Show that the curve with parametric equations $x = t \cos t$, $y = t \sin t$, $z = t$ lies on the cone $z^2 = x^2 + y^2$, and use this fact to help sketch the curve.

26. Show that the curve with parametric equations $x = \sin t$, $y = \cos t$, $z = \sin^2 t$ is the curve of intersection of the surfaces $z = x^2$ and $x^2 + y^2 = 1$. Use this fact to help sketch the curve.

27. At what points does the curve $\mathbf{r}(t) = t\,\mathbf{i} + (2t - t^2)\,\mathbf{k}$ intersect the paraboloid $z = x^2 + y^2$?

28. At what points does the helix $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle \sin t, \cos t, t \rangle$ intersect the sphere $x^2 + y^2 + z^2 = 5$?

29–32 Use a computer to graph the curve with the given vector equation. Make sure you choose a parameter domain and viewpoints that reveal the true nature of the curve.

29. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle \cos t \sin 2t, \sin t \sin 2t, \cos 2t \rangle$

30. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle t^2, \ln t, t \rangle$

31. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle t, t \sin t, t \cos t \rangle$

32. $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle t, e^t, \cos t \rangle$

33. Graph the curve with parametric equations $x = (1 + \cos 16t) \cos t$, $y = (1 + \cos 16t) \sin t$, $z = 1 + \cos 16t$. Explain the appearance of the graph by showing that it lies on a cone.

34. Graph the curve with parametric equations

$$x = \sqrt{1 - 0.25 \cos^2 10t}\, \cos t$$
$$y = \sqrt{1 - 0.25 \cos^2 10t}\, \sin t$$
$$z = 0.5 \cos 10t$$

Explain the appearance of the graph by showing that it lies on a sphere.

35. Show that the curve with parametric equations $x = t^2$, $y = 1 - 3t$, $z = 1 + t^3$ passes through the points $(1, 4, 0)$ and $(9, -8, 28)$ but not through the point $(4, 7, -6)$.

36–38 Find a vector function that represents the curve of intersection of the two surfaces.

36. The cylinder $x^2 + y^2 = 4$ and the surface $z = xy$

37. The cone $z = \sqrt{x^2 + y^2}$ and the plane $z = 1 + y$

38. The paraboloid $z = 4x^2 + y^2$ and the parabolic cylinder $y = x^2$

39. Try to sketch by hand the curve of intersection of the circular cylinder $x^2 + y^2 = 4$ and the parabolic cylinder $z = x^2$. Then find parametric equations for this curve and use these equations and a computer to graph the curve.

40. Try to sketch by hand the curve of intersection of the parabolic cylinder $y = x^2$ and the top half of the ellipsoid $x^2 + 4y^2 + 4z^2 = 16$. Then find parametric equations for this curve and use these equations and a computer to graph the curve.

41. If two objects travel through space along two different curves, it's often important to know whether they will collide. (Will a missile hit its moving target? Will two aircraft collide?) The curves might intersect, but we need to know whether the objects are in the same position *at the same time*. Suppose the trajectories of two particles are given by the vector functions

$$\mathbf{r}_1(t) = \langle t^2, 7t - 12, t^2 \rangle \qquad \mathbf{r}_2(t) = \langle 4t - 3, t^2, 5t - 6 \rangle$$

for $t \geq 0$. Do the particles collide?

42. Two particles travel along the space curves

$$\mathbf{r}_1(t) = \langle t, t^2, t^3 \rangle \qquad \mathbf{r}_2(t) = \langle 1 + 2t, 1 + 6t, 1 + 14t \rangle$$

Do the particles collide? Do their paths intersect?

43. Suppose $\mathbf{u}$ and $\mathbf{v}$ are vector functions that possess limits as $t \to a$ and let c be a constant. Prove the following properties of limits.

(a) $\lim_{t \to a} [\mathbf{u}(t) + \mathbf{v}(t)] = \lim_{t \to a} \mathbf{u}(t) + \lim_{t \to a} \mathbf{v}(t)$