

Heat Exchangers Overview

A heat exchanger is a device designed to efficiently transfer heat between two or more fluids at different temperatures. They are critical pieces of equipment in chemical plants, refineries, power generation facilities, and HVAC systems.

Common Heat Exchanger Types

Shell-and-tube heat exchangers consist of a bundle of tubes enclosed within a shell. One fluid flows through the tubes while another flows over the outside of the tubes. Plate heat exchangers use thin corrugated plates to create alternating flow channels, providing high heat transfer efficiency. Air-cooled heat exchangers use ambient air to remove heat, commonly used where cooling water is limited.

Flow Arrangements

Parallel flow heat exchangers allow both fluids to enter at the same end and flow in the same direction. Counterflow heat exchangers allow fluids to flow in opposite directions, which generally results in a higher average temperature driving force and improved thermal efficiency. Crossflow heat exchangers have fluids flowing perpendicular to one another and are common in air-cooled applications.

Heat Transfer Fundamentals

The rate of heat transfer in a heat exchanger is governed by the equation $Q = U \times A \times \Delta T_{lm}$, where U is the overall heat transfer coefficient, A is the effective heat transfer area, and ΔT_{lm} is the log mean temperature difference. The log mean temperature difference depends strongly on the flow arrangement and inlet and outlet temperatures.

Design Considerations

Key design considerations include allowable pressure drop, fouling factors, materials of construction, corrosion resistance, and ease of maintenance. Fouling reduces heat transfer efficiency over time and must be accounted for during design using appropriate fouling resistances.

Operational Considerations

Heat exchangers must be operated within specified temperature and pressure limits to prevent mechanical failure. Regular inspection and cleaning are required to mitigate fouling and corrosion. Improper operation can lead to tube leaks, loss of containment, and reduced thermal performance.

Applications in Industry

In refineries, heat exchangers are used extensively for feed preheating, product cooling, and heat recovery. In power plants, condensers are specialized heat exchangers used to condense steam exiting turbines. Chemical plants rely on heat exchangers for reactor temperature control and energy integration.

Safety Considerations

Safety considerations include relief valve sizing, thermal expansion, and isolation during maintenance. Overpressure protection is critical to prevent catastrophic failure. Proper procedures must be followed during startup and shutdown to avoid thermal shock.