The dielectric constant is the ratio of the permittivity of a substance to the permittivity of free space. It is an expression of the extent to which a material concentrates electric flux, and is the electrical equivalent of relative magnetic permeability.

As the dielectric constant increases, the electric flux density increases, if all other factors remain unchanged. This enables objects of a given size, such as sets of metal plates, to hold their electric charge for long periods of time, and/or to hold large quantities of charge. Materials with high dielectric constants are useful in the manufacture of high-value capacitors.

A high dielectric constant, in and of itself, is not necessarily desirable. Generally, substances with high dielectric constants break down more easily when subjected to intense electric fields, than do materials with low dielectric constants. For example, dry air has a low dielectric constant, but it makes an excellent dielectric material for capacitors used in high-power radio-frequency (RF) transmitters. Even if air does undergo dielectric breakdown (a condition in which the dielectric suddenly begins to conduct current), the breakdown is not permanent. When the excessive electric field is removed, air returns to its normal dielectric state. Solid dielectric substances such as polyethylene or glass, however, can sustain permanent damage.