



**International
Standard**

ISO 9038

**Determination of sustained
combustibility of liquids**

Essai de détermination de la combustion entretenue de liquides

**Fourth edition
2025-02**

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Foreword

ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) is a worldwide federation of national standards bodies (ISO member bodies). The work of preparing International Standards is normally carried out through ISO technical committees. Each member body interested in a subject for which a technical committee has been established has the right to be represented on that committee. International organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO, also take part in the work. ISO collaborates closely with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) on all matters of electrotechnical standardization.

The procedures used to develop this document and those intended for its further maintenance are described in the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 1. In particular, the different approval criteria needed for the different types of ISO document should be noted. This document was drafted in accordance with the editorial rules of the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 2 (see www.iso.org/directives).

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For an explanation of the voluntary nature of standards, the meaning of ISO specific terms and expressions related to conformity assessment, as well as information about ISO's adherence to the World Trade Organization (WTO) principles in the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), see www.iso.org/iso/foreword.html.

This document was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 28, *Petroleum and related products, fuels and lubricants from natural or synthetic sources*, in collaboration with the European Committee for Standardization (CEN) Technical Committee CEN/TC 139, *Paints and varnishes*, in accordance with the Agreement on technical cooperation between ISO and CEN (Vienna Agreement).

This fourth edition cancels and replaces the third edition (ISO 9038:2021), which has been technically revised.

The main changes are as follows:

- 8.6 and 8.7 have been revised; Warnings have been added in 8.6 to give improved advice to the operator on possible ignition and burning scenarios that can be met during the test.

Any feedback or questions on this document should be directed to the user's national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found at www.iso.org/members.html.

Introduction

A product with a flash point within a given range can continue to burn after initial ignition, while a similar product, although it has a similar flash point, does not continue to burn. This document describes a method for discriminating between those products that sustain combustion and those that do not.

The method determines whether a flammable product, when maintained at a selected test temperature, generates sufficient flammable vapour to cause ignition when an ignition source is applied and then continues to generate sufficient vapour to burn when the ignition source is moved to the “off” position.

This test method does not determine the flash point of the product under test but, by means of a test procedure, merely determines if it sustains combustion at a selected test temperature; this criterion can be required to comply with laws or regulations relating to the storage, transport and use of flammable products. Before performing this test, for safety and test optimization reasons, it is usual to determine either the actual flash point of the material or know the temperature range in which the flash point is located.

The apparatus specified in this document enables a result to be determined by a rapid procedure using a small test portion (2 ml).

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Determination of sustained combustibility of liquids

WARNING — The use of this document can involve hazardous materials, operations and equipment. This document does not purport to address all of the safety problems associated with its use. It is the responsibility of users of this document to take appropriate measures to ensure the safety and health of personnel prior to the application of this document, and to determine the applicability of any other restrictions for this purpose.

1 Scope

This document specifies a procedure, at temperatures up to 100 °C, to determine whether a liquid product, that would be classified as “flammable” by virtue of its flash point, sustains combustion at the temperature(s) specified, for example, in regulations.

NOTE Many national and international regulations classify liquids as presenting a flammable hazard based on their flash point, as determined by a recognized method. Some of these regulations allow a derogation if the substance cannot “sustain combustion” at some specified temperature(s).

The procedure is applicable to paints (including water-borne paints), varnishes, paint binders, solvents, petroleum or related products and adhesives, that have a flash point. It is not applicable to painted surfaces in respect of assessing their potential fire hazards.

This test method is applicable, in addition to test methods for flash point, for assessing the fire hazard of a product.

2 Normative references

The following documents are referred to in the text in such a way that some or all of their content constitutes requirements of this document. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

ISO 1513, *Paints and varnishes — Examination and preparation of test samples*

ISO 3170, *Petroleum liquids — Manual sampling*

ISO 3171, *Petroleum liquids — Automatic pipeline sampling*

ISO 15528, *Paints, varnishes and raw materials for paints and varnishes — Sampling*

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions apply.

ISO and IEC maintain terminology databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

- ISO Online browsing platform: available at <https://www.iso.org/obp>
- IEC Electropedia: available at <https://www.electropedia.org/>

3.1

sustained combustibility

behaviour of a material, under specified test conditions, whereby its vapour can be ignited by an ignition source and, after ignition, sufficient flammable vapour is produced for burning to continue for at least 15 s after the source of ignition has been removed

3.2

flash point

lowest temperature of the test portion, adjusted to account for variations in atmospheric pressure from 101,3 kPa, at which application of an ignition source causes the vapour of the test portion to ignite and the flame to propagate across the surface of the liquid under the specified conditions of test

4 Principle

A test portion of specified volume is introduced into a test cup, which is maintained at the test temperature. After a specified time, an ignition source is applied.

In connection with the United Nations recommendations on the Transport of Dangerous Goods^[2] as well as with the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals,^[1] and also with derived national/EC regulations, temperatures of 60,5 °C and 75,0 °C are specified for this test.

The property of the product to sustain combustion is assessed based on the ignition of its vapours or components, when exposed to an ignition source, and whether it continues to burn after the ignition source has been moved to the “off” position. The “off” and “test” positions of the ignitor are shown in [Figure A.1](#).

5 Apparatus

5.1 Combustibility tester, as specified in [Annex A](#).

5.2 Electrical heater, attached to the bottom of the test cup in a manner that provides efficient transfer of heat. The heater control shall be capable of maintaining the test cup temperature, as measured on the temperature measuring device, and in a draught-free area, within $\pm 0,5$ °C for test temperatures ≤ 100 °C.

The combustibility tester, heater and heater control unit may consist of an integrated apparatus.

5.3 Gauge, for checking that the height of the centre of the gas jet above the top of the test cup is $2,2 \text{ mm} \pm 0,1 \text{ mm}$. A calibrated metal strip is suitable.

5.4 Temperature measuring device, suitable for horizontal operation, and of suitable range and dimensions, with a resolution 0,5 °C or better. A resolution of 0,1 °C is recommended as it simplifies verification and calibration.

It shall have an accuracy $\pm 0,5$ °C.

When in position, in the block, the temperature measuring device shall be surrounded with heat transfer paste to ensure good heat transfer between the block and the measuring device.

5.5 Stopwatch or other suitable timing device, capable of measuring $15 \text{ s} \pm 1 \text{ s}$, $30 \text{ s} \pm 1 \text{ s}$ and $60 \text{ s} \pm 2 \text{ s}$. The timing device may be fitted with a means of producing an audible signal.

5.6 Syringe or pipette, capable of delivering 2,00 ml to an accuracy of $\pm 0,05 \text{ ml}$.

5.7 Ignition source and gas supply, fuelled by natural gas, coal gas, butane or any other gas found to be suitable and with gas jet fitted with a suitable regulator, or other means of regulating the gas flow, such that the width of the flame can be adjusted to $4,0 \text{ mm} \pm 0,5 \text{ mm}$.

5.8 Draught shield, to minimize draughts, fitted at the back and two sides of the instrument. A shield 350 mm high, 480 mm wide and 240 mm deep is suitable. The shield shall not be placed too close to the apparatus to avoid air turbulences over the test portion.

5.9 Barometer, measuring absolute pressure, with an accuracy of 0,5 kPa and resolution of 0,1 kPa. Do not use aneroid barometers pre-corrected to give sea level readings, such as those used at weather stations and airports.

6 Preparation of apparatus and verification

6.1 The test shall not be carried out in a small confined area because of the risk of explosion.

6.2 Thoroughly clean and dry the block and test cup assembly before use, taking care not to damage the surface of the test cup.

6.3 Position the combustibility tester on a level, stable surface and away from strong light (to facilitate observation of a flash or flame). Ensure that the top of the metal block is horizontal.

6.4 Use the gauge (5.3) to check that the jet is $2,2 \text{ mm} \pm 0,1 \text{ mm}$ above the top of the block (see Figure A.2).

6.5 The apparatus shall be set up in a draught free area.

NOTE An air speed of greater than 0,05 m/s within 50 mm of the top of the test cup can affect the result.

Surround the tester on three sides with a draught shield (5.8) for protection. If a fume hood is used, minimize the draught around the test cup.

6.6 Verify the accuracy of the temperature measuring device (5.4) and the barometer (5.9), at least every 12 months or more frequently as indicated by a user verification schedule.

6.7 Verify the performance of the apparatus, using reference materials in accordance with Annex B at least every 12 months or more frequently, as indicated by a user verification schedule.

7 Sampling

7.1 Paints, varnishes and related products

Take a representative sample of the product to be tested in accordance with ISO 15528. Examine and prepare it for testing in accordance with ISO 1513.

7.2 Petroleum and related products

7.2.1 Sampling procedure

Take a representative sample of the product to be tested, as described in ISO 3170 or ISO 3171, as appropriate.

The container shall be made of a material appropriate to the product being sampled and be filled to between 85 % and 95 % of its capacity.

7.2.2 Sample handling

7.2.2.1 Obtain a representative sample of at least 50 ml and store in a clean, tightly closed container in a cool place to minimize vapour loss or pressure build-up.

7.2.2.2 The sample shall receive only the minimum treatment to ensure homogeneity, to minimize the possible loss of volatile constituents. After removing each test portion, immediately close the sample container tightly to ensure that no volatile components escape from the container. If this closure is not secure, obtain a new sample.

7.2.2.3 Ensure that the sample is at least 10 °C below the selected test temperature before opening to remove the test portion. For mobile materials, mix the sample by gentle shaking. For viscous samples, if necessary, heat the sample in its container to a temperature such that the sample can be mixed by gentle shaking or to at least 10 °C below the selected test temperature, whichever is lower. Ensure that high pressures do not develop in the container.

8 Procedure

8.1 Record the absolute barometric pressure of the laboratory at the time of the test.

NOTE It is not considered necessary to correct the barometric pressure reading from ambient temperature to 0 °C, although some barometers automatically make this correction.

8.2 Inspect the test cup for cleanliness and absence of contamination. Use an absorbent paper tissue to wipe clean, if necessary.

8.3 This test method may be used at test temperatures up to 100 °C. However, if no test temperature information is given then test at 60,5 °C and 75,0 °C.

The test is essentially made up of three steps.

- a) An equilibrium time of 30 s or 60 s while the sample is heated in the test cup to the test temperature.
- b) A 15 s period after the ignition source has been put, and remains, in the “test” position, after which the ignition source is returned into the “off” position.
- c) A further 15 s period after the ignition source has been returned to the “off” position.

If the sustained combustibility test is required to be reported at a specified temperature (e.g. given in regulations or specifications), calculate the adjusted test temperature using the specified temperature by correcting for the effect of atmospheric pressure (see [Clause 10](#)). Use this adjusted temperature for setting the test cup temperature.

8.4 Set the heater control so that the combustibility tester is at the required and stable temperature.

8.5 Open the gas control valve and ignite the ignition source with the jet away from the test position (i.e. in the “off” position, away from the test cup). Adjust the ignition source using the flow control valve so that its width conforms to the size of the flame gauge ring (see [Annex A](#)).

8.6 The operator shall take appropriate safety precautions during the transfer of the test or reference material to the test cup and the initial application of the ignition source to the test cup and for the remainder of the test.

WARNING — Test and reference materials, in the heated test cup, can ignite violently.

WARNING — Test and reference materials in the heated test cup can burn strongly after ignition. They can also overflow the test cup and continue burning on the surface of the heating block surrounding the test cup.

8.7 Charge a clean and dry syringe or pipette with a 2,0 ml ± 0,1 ml test portion of the sample and completely discharge this test portion into the test cup. Take care not to lose any sample. Immediately start the timing device ([5.5](#)).

8.8 Test criteria are as defined in [8.8.1](#) to [8.8.3](#).

8.8.1 After a heating time of $60\text{ s} \pm 2\text{ s}$, the test portion is deemed to have reached its equilibrium temperature.

If the test portion vapour ignites and burns for more than 15 s while the ignition source is in the “off” position, the sample sustains combustion and no further testing is required: proceed to [8.9](#).

Carefully move the ignition source into the “test” position over the edge of the test cup. Maintain it in this position for $15\text{ s} \pm 1\text{ s}$ and then return it to the “off” position while observing and recording the behaviour (see [8.8.2](#) and [8.8.3](#)) of the test portion.

The ignition source shall remain alight throughout each test. See [Clause 4](#) for an overview of the test sequence.

8.8.2 If the test portion vapour ignites during the 15 s, the ignitor is in the “test” position and the test portion vapour continues to burn after the ignition source has been returned to the “off” position for at least 15 s, the sample sustains combustion and no further testing is required.

8.8.3 Intermittent flashing shall not be interpreted as sustained combustion. Normally, at the end of 15 s, the combustion has either clearly ceased or continues. In cases of doubt, the product shall be deemed to sustain combustion.

8.9 Turn off the ignition source at the end of each test using the gas control valve, and if necessary, the power to the heater. When the temperature of the metal block of the combustibility tester reaches a safe level, remove the used test portion and clean the test cup.

8.10 If the previous test did not sustain combustion, repeat the test twice (two more tests), using a new test portion for each test.

If combustion is sustained beyond 20 s, the flame may be safely extinguished rather than waiting for the flame to extinguish itself naturally.

8.11 If the result is that sustained combustion is not found when using a heating time of 60 s, repeat the procedure in [8.4](#) to [8.10](#) with new test portions but with a heating time of $30\text{ s} \pm 1\text{ s}$.

8.12 If tests at the default temperature of $60,5\text{ °C}$ have not resulted in sustained combustion then repeat the procedure in [8.4](#) to [8.10](#) at a test temperature of $75,0\text{ °C}$.

NOTE For materials containing volatile combustible compounds, a 30 s heating time minimizes the loss of these volatile compounds.

9 Assessment of results

Particular care shall be taken in translating results from this test method to large scale (real life) situations, as liquids in large quantities can behave in different ways to small samples.

If, during any of the tests, on test samples, carried out at different equilibrium times and different test temperatures, the vapour of the test portion continues to burn for at least 15 s with the ignition source in the “off” position, the sample is assessed as sustaining combustion and no further testing is required.

When verifying the apparatus using reference materials, as described in [Annex B](#), tests are always carried out at $60,5\text{ °C}$ and $75,0\text{ °C}$, as both results are required.

10 Calculation of the adjusted test temperature

If the absolute barometric pressure reading taken in [Clause 8](#) is in a unit other than kilopascals, convert the reading to kilopascals using the following:

Reading in hPa $\times 0,1 = \text{kPa}$

Reading in mbar $\times 0,1 = \text{kPa}$

Reading in mmHg $\times 0,133\,322 = \text{kPa}$

Correct the specified test temperature (e.g. 60,5 °C or 75,0 °C) as shown in [Formula \(1\)](#):

$$t_a = t_s - 0,25(101,3 - p) \quad (1)$$

where

- t_a is the adjusted test temperature in degrees Celsius;
- t_s is the specified test temperature in degrees Celsius at 101,3 kPa;
- p is the ambient barometric pressure, in kilopascals;
- 0,25 is a constant with dimensions degrees Celsius per kilopascal;
- 101,3 is the standard pressure in kilopascals.

NOTE 1 For all practical purposes, a 4 kPa change in atmospheric pressure is equivalent to a 1,0 °C change in the test temperature. The temperature correction is positive for pressures above 101,3 kPa, and negative for pressures below 101,3 kPa.

NOTE 2 [Formula \(1\)](#) has been proven for barometric pressures down to 82,0 kPa and is strictly correct only up to 104,7 kPa. Atmospheric pressures corrections at pressures down to 82,0 kPa have been shown to be valid in an ISO 3679 study.^[3]

11 Precision

Precision data have not been determined due to the nature of the procedure and reporting criteria.

12 Test report

The test report shall contain at least the following information:

- a) all details necessary for complete identification of the product tested;
- b) a reference to this document, i.e. ISO 9038:2025;
- c) any deviation, by agreement or otherwise, from the test procedure specified;
- d) the ambient atmospheric pressure;
- e) whether or not the product sustained combustion and, if combustion was sustained the heating time (30 s or 60 s) and test temperature;
- f) any unusual features observed;
- g) the date of the test.

Annex A (normative)

Combustibility tester

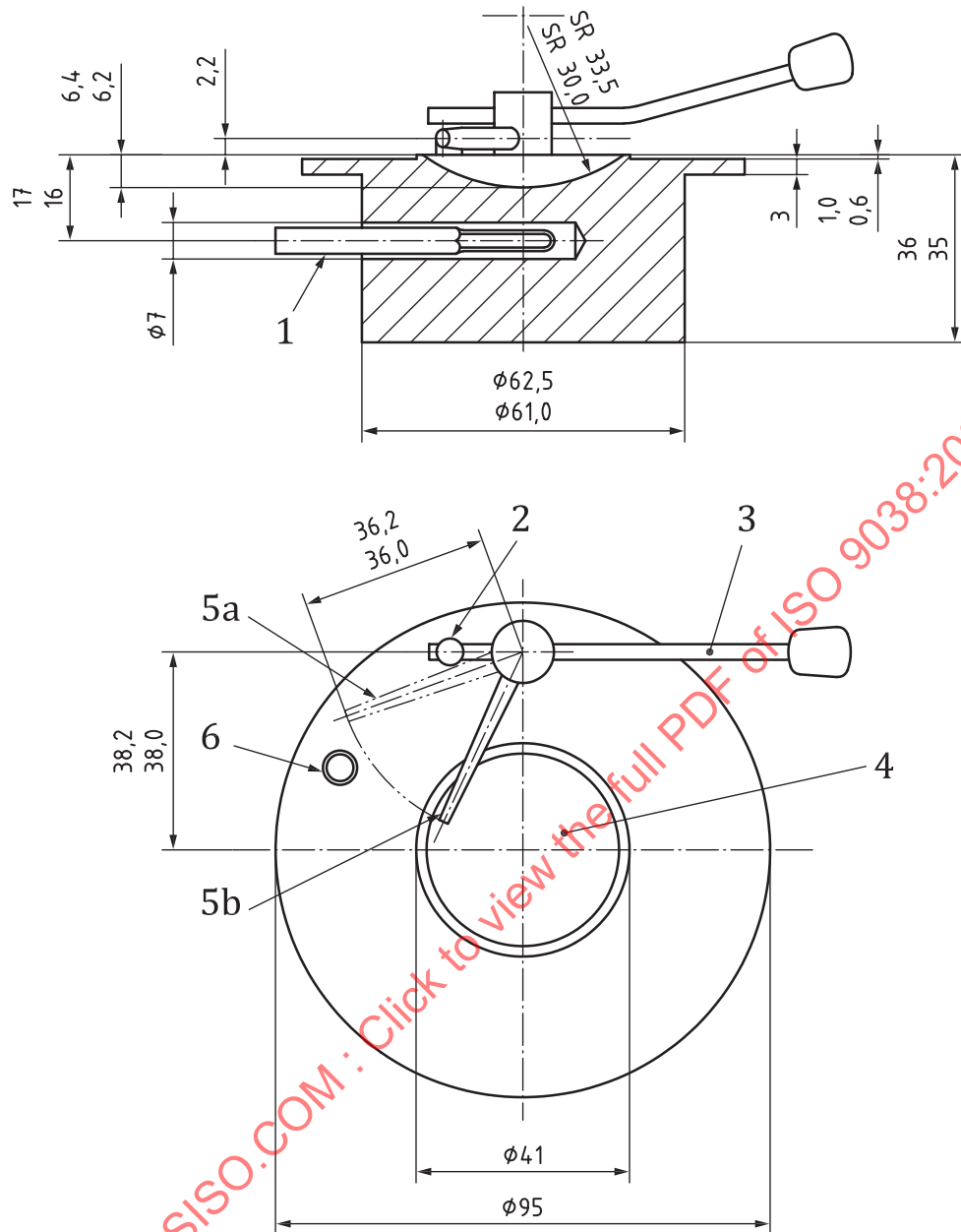
A combustibility tester consists of a block of aluminium alloy or other corrosion-resistant metal of high thermal conductivity (see [Figure A.1](#)). The block has a concave depression (test cup) and a well drilled to take a temperature measuring device ([5.4](#)). A small gas jet assembly on a swivel is attached to the block. The handle and gas inlet for the gas jet can be fitted at any convenient angle to the gas jet. The height of the centre of the gas jet above the top of the test cup is $2,2 \text{ mm} \pm 0,1 \text{ mm}$ (see [Figure A.2](#)). A flame gauge ring $4,0 \text{ mm} \pm 0,5 \text{ mm}$ in diameter shall be engraved on top of the tester near the ignition source ([5.7](#)) when it is in the “off” position. The dimensions of the block and test cup assembly are given in [Table A.1](#) and the dimensions of the gas jet assembly are given in [Table A.2](#). The sensing element of the temperature measuring device shall be located centrally under the test cup as shown in [Figure A.1](#).

Table A.1 — Dimensions of block and test cup assembly

Property	Dimension mm
Diameter of block	61,0 to 62,5
Height of block	35,0 to 36,0
Diameter of flange	Approximately 95,0
Thickness of flange	Approximately 3,0
Height of test cup lip above flange	0,6 to 1,0
Outside diameter of test cup lip	Approximately 41,0
Spherical radius of test cup	33,0 to 33,5
Depth of test cup	6,2 to 6,4
Distance from top of block to temperature measuring device well (centre)	16,0 to 17,0
Diameter of flame gauge ring	$4,0 \pm 0,5$
Diameter of temperature measuring device well	Approximately 7,0 ^a
Angle subtended by jet from stop (“off” position) to “test” position	45°
See Figure A.1 for a diagram of the block and test cup assembly.	
^a The diameter of the temperature measuring device well may be reduced to fit the device used.	

Table A.2 — Dimensions of gas jet assembly

Property	Dimension mm
Outside diameter of jet	3,0 to 4,0
Jet end taper	1,7 to 2,3
Bore of jet	0,6 to 0,8
Length of jet from centre of pivot to tip	36,0 to 36,2
Distance of axis of pivot from centre of test cup	38,0 to 38,2
Height of centreline of jet above top of test cup lip	$2,2 \pm 0,1$
See Figure A.2 for a diagram of the gas jet assembly.	



Key

- 1 temperature measuring device
- 2 stop
- 3 handle
- 4 test cup
- 5a ignition source in "off" position
- 5b ignition source in "test" position
- 6 gauge ring

Figure A.1 — Block and test cup assembly