Series of Collisions

Now let's consider the force on a body when it undergoes a series of identical, re-peated collisions. For example, as a prank, we might adjust one of those machines that fire tennis balls to fire them at a rapid rate directly at a wall. Each collision would produce a force on the wall, but that is not the force we are seeking. We want the average force F_{avg} on the wall during the bombardment—that is, the av-erage force during a large number of collisions.

In Fig. 9-10, a steady stream of projectile bodies, with identical mass m and linear momenta $m\vec{v}$, moves along an x axis and collides with a target body that is fixed in place. Let n be the number of projectiles that collide in a time interval Δt. Because the motion is along only the x axis, we can use the components of the momenta along that axis. Thus, each projectile has initial momentum mv and undergoes a change Δp in linear momentum because of the collision. The total change in linear momentum for n projectiles during interval Δt is $n\,\Delta p$. The resulting impulse $\vec{J}$ on the target during Δt is along the x axis and has the same magnitude of $n\,\Delta p$ but is in the opposite direction. We can write this relation in component form as

$$J = -n\,\Delta p, \tag{9-36}$$

where the minus sign indicates that J and Δp have opposite directions.

By rearranging Eq. 9-35 and substituting Eq. 9-36, we find the average force F_{avg} acting on the target during the collisions:

$$F_{avg} = \frac{J}{\Delta t} = -\frac{n}{\Delta t}\Delta p = -\frac{n}{\Delta t}m\,\Delta v. \tag{9-37}$$

This equation gives us F_{avg} in terms of $n/\Delta t$, the rate at which the projectiles collide with the target, and Δv, the change in the velocity of those projectiles.

If the projectiles stop upon impact, then in Eq. 9-37 we can substitute, for Δv,

$$\Delta v = v_f - v_i = 0 - v = -v, \tag{9-38}$$

where v_i (= v) and v_f (= 0) are the velocities before and after the collision, respectively. If, instead, the projectiles bounce (rebound) directly backward from the target with no change in speed, then $v_f = -v$ and we can substitute

$$\Delta v = v_f - v_i = -v - v = -2v. \tag{9-39}$$

In time interval Δt, an amount of mass $\Delta m = nm$ collides with the target. With this result, we can rewrite Eq. 9-37 as

$$F_{avg} = -\frac{\Delta m}{\Delta t}\Delta v. \tag{9-40}$$

This equation gives the average force F_{avg} in terms of $\Delta m/\Delta t$, the rate at which mass collides with the target. Here again we can substitute for Δv from Eq. 9-38 or 9-39 depending on what the projectiles do.
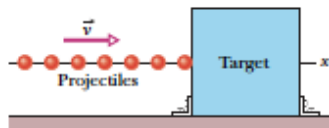

Fig. 9-10 A steady stream of projectiles, with identical linear momenta, collides with a target, which is fixed in place. The average force F_{avg} on the target is to the right and has a magnitude that depends on the rate at which the projectiles collide with the target or, equivalently, the rate at which mass collides with the target.