

Cloud spotter's guide

Learn to forecast the weather just by looking at the clouds.

If you're staying safe at home, one thing you can do is gaze out of the windows at the clouds. By learning a little about different cloud types, you might even be able to predict when it's going to rain.

Clouds constantly change shape, but there are names that describe some common forms. Cirrus (or

cirro) are high-up wispy shapes; cumulus (or cumulo) are puffy pillows; and stratus (or strato) are flattened and smooth shapes. All you need to do to become an expert cloud spotter is to read the descriptions to the right of this page. Then, each day, look up in the sky, recognise and record the kinds of cloud you see.

4 to 7½ miles: high-level clouds

Clouds that occur high in the sky are made of ice crystals and droplets of very cold water.

Cirrus: Large numbers of these wispy, transparent clouds suggest a storm is coming.

Cirrocumulus: These rippled blankets can produce a "mackerel sky" at sunset and sunrise.

Cirrostratus: These large, stable sheets of cloud may bring rain or snow with them.

1¼ to 4 miles: mid-level clouds

Clouds in the atmosphere's middle regions may be made of water droplets, ice crystals or both.

Alto cumulus: These small, patchy-looking, fluffy clouds may produce rain or snow that evaporates before it reaches the ground.

Altostratus: A cover of this stable, uniform grey cloud often leads to rain or snow, depending on the air temperature. Thicker layers mean heavier showers.

Surface to 1¼ miles: low-level clouds

Clouds at lower levels contain mostly water.

Strato cumulus: These lumpy-looking clouds can be mistaken for rain clouds.

Cumulus: These are the classic fluffy, cauliflower-shaped clouds. Usually wider than they are tall, they often indicate fine weather, but if they get taller, they can become multi-level clouds. If they grow upwards, rain showers are on the way.

Stratus: Ragged, very low-level clouds.

Nimbostratus: Thick, featureless, grey clouds that signal dark skies and continuing rain.

Multi-level clouds

Clouds that tower upwards are made of water at their base and ice crystals at the top.

Cumulonimbus: These monster-sized, very dark grey clouds have a flat base and the top can be up to 13 miles from the ground. They bring rainstorms, thunder and lightning, hail and even tornadoes.

