



# Expansion Joints for PVC Rigid Nonmetallic Conduit

All construction materials expand and contract with fluctuations in temperature. These temperature changes affect polyvinyl chloride (PVC) more than traditional materials such as aluminum and steel. For example, the coefficient of thermal expansion for PVC ( $3.38 \times 10^{-5}$  in./in./°F) is almost three times as high as for aluminum and six times as high as for steel.

Thermal expansion and contraction have a significant effect on long straight runs of conduit. For this

application, expansion joints are used to accommodate changes in length. This prevents potentially harmful thermal stresses in the conduit itself or in any supporting structures.

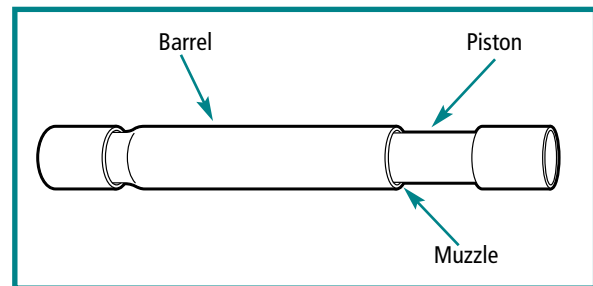
## Expansion Fittings Required

Section 347-9 of the National Electric Code® requires that expansion joints be installed for rigid nonmetallic conduit to compensate for thermal expansion and contraction where the length change is anticipated to be 0.25 in. (6.36mm) or greater, in accordance with Table 347-9 of the 1999 NEC, in a straight run between securely mounted items. Securely mounted items are boxes, cabinets, elbows, or other conduit terminations.

## When are expansion joints used?

The importance of knowing when to use an expansion joint is as important as knowing how to use an expansion joint. Expansion joints are used in aboveground installations where temperature changes are anticipated to exceed 25°F (14°C).

Expansion joints are usually used where the straight run length is greater than 25 feet and expected temperature change is greater than 60°F. Rigid PVC conduit has a coefficient of expansion of  $3.38 \times 10^{-5}$  in./in./°F. A 10 foot length will change in length about  $\frac{3}{8}$ " with a change in temperature of 100°F. This equates to more than 4 inches over a 100 foot run.



## When are expansion joints used? *(continued)*

Changes in conduit temperature outdoors can exceed 140°F considering the heat of summer and cold of winter. This means a 100 foot run of conduit could change approximately 6 inches in length between summer and winter. If not compensated for with expansion joints, this change in length can cause unsightly conduit bowing, distorted boxes, or broken couplings or fittings. The anticipated expansion and contraction for various lengths of runs and temperature changes is given in Table 10 of Chapter 9 of the National Electric Code®. (See Table below)

Expansion Characteristics of PVC Rigid Nonmetallic Conduit Coefficient of Thermal Expansion = $3.38 \times 10^{-5}$ in./in./°F							
Temperature Change Degrees F	Length Change in Inches per 100 ft. of PVC Conduit	Temperature Change in Degrees F	Length Change in Inches per 100 ft. of PVC Conduit	Temperature Change of Degrees F	Length Change in Inches per 100 ft. of PVC Conduit	Temperature Change of Degrees F	Length Change in Inches per 100 ft. of PVC Conduit
5	0.2	55	2.2	105	4.2	155	6.3
10	0.4	60	2.4	110	4.5	160	6.5
15	0.6	65	2.6	115	4.7	165	6.7
20	0.8	70	2.8	120	4.9	170	6.9
25	1.0	75	3.0	125	5.1	175	7.1
30	1.2	80	3.2	130	5.3	180	7.3
35	1.4	85	3.4	135	5.5	185	7.5
40	1.6	90	3.6	140	5.7	190	7.7
45	1.8	95	3.8	145	5.9	195	7.9
50	2.0	100	4.1	150	6.1	200	8.1

**For conduit installed outdoors**, the maximum and minimum air temperature expected can be used to calculate the range of expansion and contraction. Conduit installed outdoors in direct sunlight will be considerably hotter than air temperature during the day because of the absorption of the sun’s heat. Expansion joints should be installed to allow for the anticipated temperature change. For direct sunlight exposure, add 30°F to ambient air temperature change.

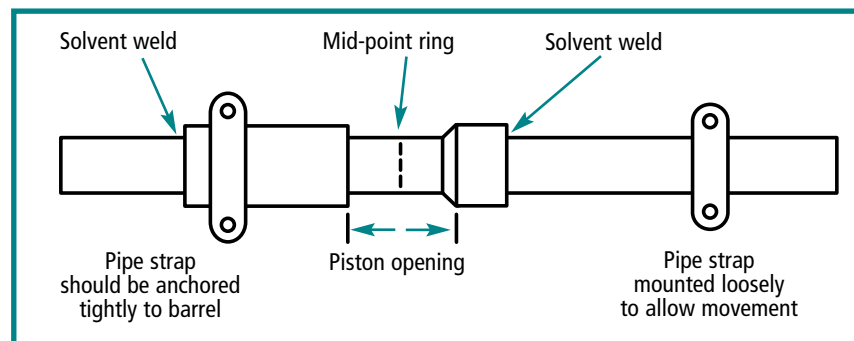
**Where installed inside buildings**, the conduit temperature is the ambient air temperature plus the heat contributed by the conductors inside the conduit. Generally, expansion joints are not required inside unless conduit is located in an area of widely varying temperatures. Attics of buildings are areas where temperature swings exceeding 100°F are common and expansion joints are required.

Length of Run (Feet)	Inches of Expansion Allowance Needed for Temperature Changes of:				
	60°F	80°F	100°F	120°F	140°F
25	5/8	3/4	1	1 1/4	1 3/8
50	1 1/4	1 5/8	2	2 3/8	2 3/4
75	1 3/4	2 3/8	3	3 1/2	4 1/8
100	2 3/8	3 1/8	4	4 3/4	5 1/2
125	3	4	5	6	7
150	3 5/8	4 3/4	6	7 1/8	8 1/4

*Add 30°F to temperature change for direct sunlight exposure.*

## Proper Position

Expansion joints are usually installed in a horizontal position. However, if they must be put in a vertical application, the open end should be securely fastened in the down position. The expansion coupling must be installed close to the top of the run with the barrel pointing down, so that rain water does not enter into the opening. The lower end of the conduit run should be secured at the bottom. This will result in an upward movement due to the length change caused by temperature variations.



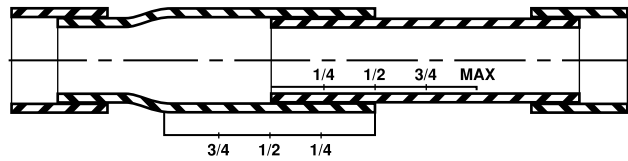
## Setting Position of Piston

If an expansion joint was installed completely closed with the piston bottomed on a cool day, there would be no travel available when the conduit warmed up and expanded. If it was installed in a maximum open position on a hot day, the expansion joint would pull apart when cooled. Thus, "setting" the expansion joint is very important.

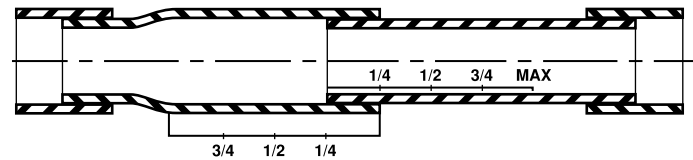
In addition to the proper number and sizes of expansion joints chosen, they must also be installed so they can accommodate the expected length change. This requires proper "setting" of the expansion joint. Most will be installed at a temperature halfway between maximum and minimum; for example, installation at 65°F with an anticipated maximum temperature of 125°F and a minimum of 5°F. In this case, the expansion joint would be installed or set with the inner piston halfway out. Expansion joints are marked with a mid-point ring. If it was a colder day, for example 35°F with the same expected temperature change range, the inner piston would be set with 3/4 of its maximum travel out. If the temperature was hot (95°F), it would be set with the inner piston only 1/4 way out.

## Setting Expansion Joint for Temperature

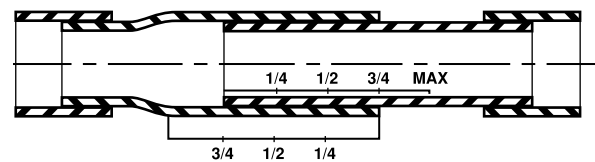
**A.** For medium temperature (65° - 75° F) set piston 1/2 way in barrel.



**B.** For cold temperature (20° - 30° F) set piston 1/4 way in barrel.



**C.** For hot temperature (95° - 105° F) set piston 3/4 way in barrel.



When a more precise calculation for expansion is needed, it can be calculated as follows:

1. You must determine the maximum temperature range. This is done by subtracting the lowest temperature you anticipate from the highest temperature you anticipate.

*Example: Let's say in winter, we expect the temperature to get down to -10°F and in the summer, we expect the temperature to get as high as 110°F. The maximum temperature range is 110 - (-10) = 120°F.*

2. The length of run between fixed points must be determined. *Let's assume 90 feet for this example.*

3. The total expansion change can be calculated as follows:

*Total expansion change in inches = (coefficient of thermal expansion) x (maximum temperature range) x (length of run in inches).*

*Example: Total expansion change = (3.38 x 10<sup>-5</sup> in./in./°F) x (120°F) x (90ft x 12in./ft) = 4.38 in.*

*Thus, travel can be covered with one 6 inch expansion joint.*

4. The "set position" can be determined from the following example.

*Example: If the temperature at installation was 65°F, the difference from maximum is 110°F - 65°F = 45°F.*

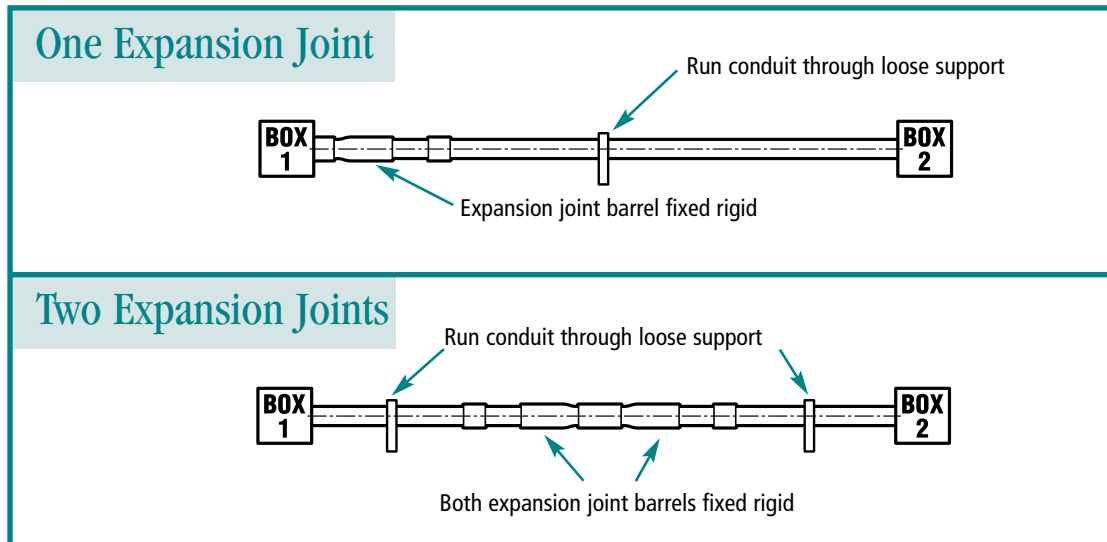
*Use ratio: (difference from maximum) / (Total expected range) = 45/120 = .375 in.*

*(0.375) x 6 inch travel = 2.25 in.*

*The piston at 65°F would retract 2.25 inches.*

## Installation

1. The expansion joint should be mounted so that the piston can travel in a straight line within the barrel. If alignment is not straight, the piston will bind and prevent the joint from working properly.
2. The expansion joint barrel must be clamped securely whereas the conduit is mounted loosely so that it can slide freely during expansion and contraction.
3. Nonmetallic conduit straps suitable for this purpose, must be used to allow the conduit to move freely during expansion and contraction while properly securing it.



## Location

Proper placement and installation of expansion joints and conduit allow for correct functioning of the expansion joints. For example, if one expansion joint is needed between two boxes, the barrel of the joint must be securely fastened close to one box. The conduit must be fastened loosely so as to allow for movement during expansion and contraction.

If there is more than one expansion joint used, then joints are installed at the boxes with the center of the conduit run rigidly fixed. With two expansion joints utilized, the center of the conduit must be fixed so as to properly proportion expansion or contraction between the two joints. Otherwise, the expansion or contraction would only occur at the free joint, while the tighter joint would not move.

In a very long run, two or more joints should be placed in series with one another. The barrels of each expansion joint must be anchored so as to allow each length of conduit to expand or contract freely. Each section acts independently.

## Wire Inside the Conduit

The coefficient of expansion for the wire inside the conduit is much lower than the nonmetallic conduit, therefore its length change due to expansion and contraction is very little. If the expansion joints are mounted correctly, there should be little concern as to its effect on the wires inside.

## Use of Expansion Joints Where Concrete Encased or Direct Buried

---

In normal circumstances, expansion joints are not needed with concrete encased nonmetallic conduit since the movement of the conduit will coincide with the expansion and contraction of the concrete. The only place where an expansion joint would be utilized is where the concrete itself has an expansion joint.

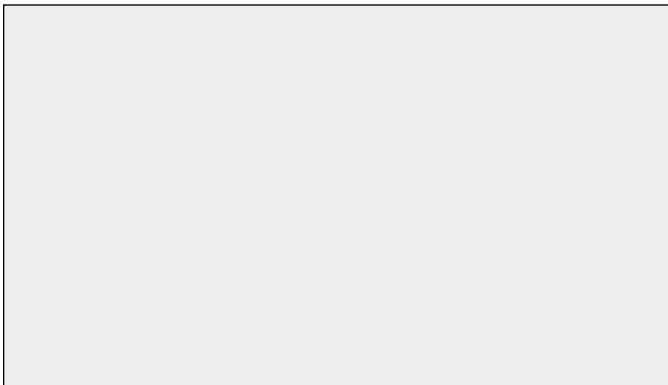
In direct burial situations, expansion joints are not needed because the ground has relatively constant temperatures. In cold areas, buried lines must be below the frost line to prevent buckling during freezing and thawing cycles. In warmer areas, the depth of cover protects against temperature extremes.

## Most Common Mistake

---

The most common error is not using enough expansion joints. When in doubt, use an additional expansion joint. It is much more difficult and costly to insert an expansion joint once wiring has been set up and in service.

*This document is provided courtesy of:*



*This document was prepared by the NEMA PVC Polymer Raceway Products (5TC) Technical Committee.*

