Natural rubber is produced only in certain developing countries with a tropical climate. It is derived from a liquid called latex, which is extracted mainly from the bark of rubber trees (Hevea brasiliensis) through a tapping process. (Certain other trees can be used, such as the para rubber tree, Balata gum and Guayule trees.) The most serious disease affecting rubber production is root rot, which destroys first the tree’s roots and then the whole tree.

Uses
Through vulcanization (a chemical process involving combination with sulphur and heating), rubber acquires qualities such as strength, elasticity, impermeability and resistance to abrasion and solvents. Unvulcanized rubber is infrequently used, and mainly for rubber cement, crepe-rubber soles for footwear, and adhesive tape.

The invention of vulcanization in 1839 revolutionized the transport industry, making possible, for instance, the development of pneumatic rubber tyres. While the end markets for natural rubber are diverse, nearly half of output currently goes to tyre production (especially truck and aircraft tyres), and about 60% ends up in the automotive market as a whole (for items such as belts, hoses and seals). Rubber is also used in a range of other products such as gloves, roller coverings, mats, condoms, hot water bottles, protective clothing and sports equipment (for example, billiard table cushions).