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Viewer discretion advised: Material may contain medical images that may be disturbing to some viewers.
Diffusion of Gases

Thomas Sisson, M.D.
Objectives

• To understand the diffusion of gases in the lung
  – Define diffusion and contrast with bulk flow
  – State Fick’s law for diffusion
  – Distinguish between diffusion limitation and perfusion limitation
  – Describe the diffusion of oxygen from the alveoli into the blood
  – Describe the diffusion of CO$_2$ from blood to alveoli
  – Define diffusing capacity and discuss its measurement
Airway Branching

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Structure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trachea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Main Bronchi</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lobar Bronchus</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segmental Bronchus</td>
<td>3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronchioles</td>
<td>5-15</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resp. Bronchioles</td>
<td>17-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alveolar Ducts</td>
<td>20-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alveolas Sacs</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SEER Training Website (training.seer.cancer.gov)
Bulk Flow vs. Diffusion

- The cross sectional area increases with airway generation.
- Large volume/time, with decreasing velocity at any point.
  - Imagine a fast flowing river reaching a delta.
- The velocity of gas during inspiration becomes tiny at the level of the respiratory bronchiole- at this level diffusion becomes the chief mode of gas movement.

Source: Undetermined
Gas Movement due to Diffusion

- Diffusion - movement of gas due to molecular motion, rather than flow.
  
  - Akin to the spread of a scent in a room, rather than wind.

  - Random motion leads to distribution of gas molecules in alveolus.
Gas Movement due to Diffusion

(1) Source: Jkrieger (wikimedia.org)

(2) Source: Jkrieger (wikimedia.org)

(3) Source: Jkrieger (wikimedia.org)
Diffusion

• Driven by concentration gradients:
  – differences in partial pressure of the individual gases.

• Movement of $O_2$ and $CO_2$ between the level of the respiratory bronchiole and that of the alveolar space depends only on diffusion.

• The distances are small, so diffusion here is fast.
Diffusion of Gas Through the Alveolar Wall

Alveolar airspace

Pathway of diffusion

Source: Undetermined
Diffusion of Oxygen Across the Alveolar Wall

- **Pulmonary Surfactant**
  - Diffuses/Dissolves
- **Alveolar Epithelium**
  - Diffuses/Dissolves
- **Alveolar Interstitium**
  - Diffuses/Dissolves
- **Capillary Endothelium**
  - Diffuses/Dissolves
- **Plasma**
  - Diffuses/Dissolves
- **Red Blood Cell**
  - Diffuses/Dissolves
  - Binds
- **Hemoglobin**
Fick’s Law for Diffusion

\[ V_{\text{gas}} = \frac{A \times D \times (P_1 - P_2)}{T} \]

- \( V_{\text{gas}} \) = volume of gas diffusing through the tissue barrier per time, in ml/min
- \( A \) = surface area available for diffusion
- \( D \) = diffusion coefficient of the gas (diffusivity)
- \( T \) = thickness of the barrier
- \( P_1 - P_2 \) = partial pressure difference of the gas
Diffusivity

\[ D \equiv \frac{\text{Solubility}}{\sqrt{\text{MW}}} \]

- \( \text{O}_2 \) has lower MW than \( \text{CO}_2 \)
- Solubility of \( \text{CO}_2 \) is 24x that of \( \text{O}_2 \)
- \( \text{CO}_2 \) diffuses 20x more rapidly through the alveolar capillary barrier than \( \text{O}_2 \)
Diffusion Across a Membrane

\[ \dot{V}_{\text{gas}} = \frac{A \cdot D (P_1 - P_2)}{T} \]

\[ D \propto \frac{\text{Solubility}}{\sqrt{\text{MW}}} \]

\( A = \text{Area} \)

\( T = \text{Thickness} \)
Limitations of Gas Transfer

• Diffusion Coefficient.
  – Different gases behave differently.

• Surface Area and Thickness of the alveolar wall.

• Partial Pressure Gradient across the alveolar wall for each individual gas.
  – Depends on both alveolar and mixed venous partial pressure (start of capillary).
Change in Blood Partial Pressure of Three Gases with Time in the Capillary

N\textsubscript{2}O is \textbf{Perfusion Limited}

- \(\text{N}_2\text{O}\) is very soluble in biological tissues and diffuses rapidly.
- \(\text{PcN}_2\text{O}\) rises rapidly in the alveolar capillary
- Quickly have \(\text{PcN}_2\text{O} = \text{PAN}_2\text{O}\).
- Because there is no pressure gradient, no diffusion occurs after about 0.1 sec.
- Fresh blood entering the capillary has not yet equilibrated and can still take up \(\text{N}_2\text{O}\).
- Increased blood flow will increase gas transfer
- Transfer of \(\text{N}_2\text{O}\) is \textit{perfusion limited}.
Change in Blood Partial Pressure of Three Gases with Time in the Capillary

Carbon Monoxide is **Diffusion Limited**

- Blood PCO rises very slowly because CO is bound to Hgb, with very little dissolved.
- Capillary PcCO does not approach $P_{A\text{CO}}$.
- Partial pressure gradient is maintained throughout the time the blood is in the capillary.
  - Diffusion continues throughout this time.
- Transfer of CO is limited by diffusivity, surface area, and thickness of the wall.
Transfer of Oxygen

Transfer of Oxygen

- Under normal conditions, $P_{co_2}$ reaches $P_{ao_2}$ about 1/3 of the distance through the capillary.

- Therefore under normal conditions transfer is perfusion limited.

- With exercise, the time blood spends in the capillary is reduced - no longer perfusion but diffusion limitation.

- In the setting of thickened alveolar wall, transfer is reduced.
  - With severely disturbed diffusion, there is limitation even at rest
Transfer of Oxygen is Limited at Low Alveolar $O_2$
Transfer of CO$_2$

- Is transfer of CO$_2$ diffusion or perfusion limited?

Transfer of CO$_2$

Why is the transfer of CO$_2$ so similar to that of O$_2$?

$$V_{\text{gas}} = \frac{A \times D \times (P_1 - P_2)}{T}$$

Diffusivity of CO$_2$ is 20x > than that of O$_2$
Partial pressure gradient of CO$_2$ is 45→40
Partial pressure gradient of O$_2$ is 100→40
Fick’s Law for Diffusion

\[ V_{gas} = \frac{(AxD)}{T} \times (P_1 - P_2) \]

- \( V_{gas} \) = volume of gas diffusing through the tissue barrier per time, in ml/min
- \( A \) = surface area available for diffusion
- \( D \) = diffusion coefficient of the gas (diffusivity)
- \( T \) = thickness of the barrier
- \( P_1 - P_2 \) = partial pressure difference of the gas

\( \frac{(AxD)}{T} = \text{diffusing capacity of the lung (DL)} \)
Diffusing Capacity

\[
\frac{(AxD)}{T} = \frac{\dot{V}_{gas}}{(P_1x - P_2x)} = D_{Lx}
\]

Source: Undetermined
Measuring Diffusing Capacity

- Inhale mixture containing known concentration of tracer gas.
- Allow diffusion from alveolus into blood.
- Measure concentration of tracer in exhaled gas.
- Calculate rate of removal of tracer gas by diffusion into blood and the partial pressure gradient from alveolus into blood.
- Choice of gas:
  - Readily available.
  - Easily measured.
  - Diffusion limited.
  - No arterial partial pressure.
We Could Use DLO$_2$

$$\frac{AxD}{T} = DLO_2$$

$$\dot{V}_O_2 = DLO_2 (P_{A}O_2 - P_{C}O_2) = \text{ml O}_2 / \text{min}$$

$$DLO_2 = \frac{\dot{V}_O_2}{(P_{A}O_2 - P_{C}O_2)}$$
Carbon Monoxide is an Ideal Gas for Measuring Diffusing Capacity

- CO binds avidly to hemoglobin.
- While CO content of the blood rises, the PCO in blood rises very slowly.
- The gradient of partial pressures from alveolus to blood remains almost constant during test.

Carbon Monoxide Measurement of Diffusing Capacity

\[ DLCO = \frac{\dot{V}_{CO}}{P_{ACO} - P_{cc}CO} \]

\[ P_{cc}CO \approx 0 \]

Normal DLCO = 20-30 ml/min/mmHg
DLCO Has Two Components

Diffusion across the alveolar membrane.

Reaction with hemoglobin.

\[
\frac{1}{DL} = \frac{1}{Dm} + \frac{1}{\theta x Vc}
\]
Conditions that Impact Diffusion Capacity for CO.

\[ DLCO = \frac{AxD}{T} \]

- Decreased Surface Area.
  - Destruction of Alveolar Wall
- Increased Barrier Thickness.
- Anemia.
How would the Following Change the Diffusion Capacity of the Lungs?

• Changing from supine to upright
• Exercise
• Anemia
• Valsalva maneuver
• Low cardiac output due to hemorrhage
• Emphysema
• Pulmonary fibrosis