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M1 - Cardiovascular / Respiratory, Fall 2007

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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 $\text{CO}_2$ from blood to alveoli
  – Define diffusing capacity and discuss its measurement
Airway Branching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: SEER Training Website (training.seer.cancer.gov)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trachea</td>
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<td>Main Bronchi</td>
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<td>Terminal Bronchioles</td>
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<td>Resp. Bronchioles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alveolar Ducts</td>
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<td>Alveolas Sacs</td>
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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 alveoli.
Gas Movement due to Diffusion

(1)  

(2)  

(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
  - Binds
- Hemoglobin
Fick’s Law for Diffusion

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

- $V_{gas}$ = 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
Diffusivity

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

- \( O_2 \) has lower MW than \( \text{CO}_2 \)
- Solubility of \( \text{CO}_2 \) is 24x that of \( O_2 \)
- \( \text{CO}_2 \) diffuses 20x more rapidly through the alveolar capillary barrier than \( O_2 \)
Diffusion Across a Membrane

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

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

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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$_2$O is Perfusion Limited

- N$_2$O is very soluble in biological tissues and diffuses rapidly.
- PcN$_2$O rises rapidly in the alveolar capillary
- Quickly have PcN$_2$O = PA N$_2$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 N$_2$O.
- Increased blood flow will increase gas transfer
- Transfer of N$_2$O is 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 $P_A^{CO}$.
- 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 $\text{O}_2$
Transfer of CO₂

- Is transfer of CO₂ diffusion or perfusion limited?

Transfer of CO₂

Why is the transfer of CO₂ so similar to that of O₂?

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

Diffusivity of CO₂ is 20x > than that of O₂
Partial pressure gradient of CO₂ is 45→40
Partial pressure gradient of O₂ 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

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

\[
\frac{(AxD)}{T} = \frac{\dot{V}_{\text{gas}}}{(P_{1x} - P_{2x})} = D_{Lx}
\]

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$_2$

\[
\frac{AxD}{T} = D_{LO_2}
\]

\[
\dot{V}_{O_2} = D_{LO_2} (P_{A_2}O_2 - P_{CO_2}) = \text{ml O}_2/\text{min}
\]

\[
D_{LO_2} = \frac{\dot{V}_{O_2}}{(P_{A_2}O_2 - P_{CO_2})}
\]
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

\[ DLCO = \frac{\dot{V}_{CO}}{P_ACO - P_cCO} \]

\[ P_cCO \approx 0 \]

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

Diffusion across the alveolar membrane.

Reaction with hemoglobin.

\[
\frac{1}{DL} = \frac{1}{D_m} + \frac{1}{\theta_x V_c}
\]
Conditions that Impact Diffusion Capacity for CO.

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

- Decreased Surface Area.
  - Destruction of Alveolar Wall
- Increased Barrier Thickness.
- Anemia.

\( DLCO \)
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