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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 CO₂ from blood to alveoli
  – Define diffusing capacity and discuss its measurement
Airway Branching

| Source: SEER Training Website (training.seer.cancer.gov) |  |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Airway Branching</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trachea</td>
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<td>Main Bronchi</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Lobar Bronchus</td>
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<td>Segmental Bronchus</td>
<td>3-4</td>
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<td>Bronchioles</td>
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<td>Resp. Bronchioles</td>
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<td>Alveolar Ducts</td>
<td>20-22</td>
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<tr>
<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 alveolus.
Gas Movement due to Diffusion
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

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

- \( V_{\text{gas}} \) = 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

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

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

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

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

where:
- \( A \) = Area
- \( P_1 \) and \( P_2 \) are partial pressures
- \( T \) = Thickness
- \( D \) = Diffusion coefficient
- \( MW \) = Molecular weight

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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

N₂O is Perfusion Limited

- N₂O is very soluble in biological tissues and diffuses rapidly.
- Pcn₂O rises rapidly in the alveolar capillary.
- Quickly have Pcn₂O =Pan₂O.
- 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 N₂O.
- Increased blood flow will increase gas transfer.
- Transfer of N₂O 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 PA 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 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$_{gas}$ = $\frac{A \times D \times (P_1 - P_2)}{T}$

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

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

- \(V_{\text{gas}}\) = volume of gas diffusing through the tissue barrier per time, in \(\text{ml/min}\)
- \(A\) = 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

\((AxD)/T\) = **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 DLO₂

\[
\frac{\text{AxD}}{T} = D_L O_2
\]

\[
\dot{V}_{O_2} = D_L O_2 \left( P_A O_2 - P_C O_2 \right) = \text{ml O}_2 / \text{min}
\]

\[
D_L O_2 = \frac{\dot{V}_{O_2}}{\left( P_A O_2 - P_C O_2 \right)}
\]
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

\[ DLCO = \frac{V_{CO}}{P_{ACO} - P_{cCO}} \]

\[ P_{cCO} \approx 0 \]

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

Diffusion across the alveolar membrane.

Reaction with hemoglobin.

\[
\frac{1}{DL} = \frac{1}{Dm} + \frac{1}{\theta_x Vc}
\]
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