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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 CO$_2$ from blood to alveoli
  - Define diffusing capacity and discuss its measurement
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

Source: Jkrieger (wikimedia.org)
Diffusion

• Driven by concentration gradients:
  – differences in partial pressure of the individual gases.
• Movement of O\textsubscript{2} and CO\textsubscript{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

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

- \( \text{O}_2 \) 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

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

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

A = Area

P_1, P_2

T = 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

**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

A. [Graph showing the transfer of oxygen with Alveolar $P_{O_2}$ on the y-axis and Time in capillary on the x-axis. The graph includes lines for Normal, $\frac{1}{4}$ Normal, and $\frac{1}{3}$ Normal oxygen partial pressure in blood, with markers for Enter capillary, Exercise, and Leave capillary.]

Transfer of Oxygen

• Under normal conditions, $PcO_2$ reaches $PAO_2$ 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\textsubscript{2} 

- Is transfer of CO\textsubscript{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

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

- \( V_{gas} \): 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

\[
\frac{(AxD)}{T} = \frac{V_{\text{gas}}}{(P_1x - P_2x)} = D_{Lx}
\]

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 $DLO_2$

\[
\frac{AxD}{T} = DLO_2
\]

\[
\dot{V}_{O_2} = D_{LO_2} \left( P_{A O_2} - P_{C O_2} \right) = ml \ O_2 \ /min
\]
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.

*Source: Pulmonary Physiology, The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2007*
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.

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