

## 4.14: Lipids—Part 1

### Waxes

Waxes are esters of fatty acids with long chain monohydric alcohols (one hydroxyl group). Natural waxes are often mixtures of such esters, and may also contain hydrocarbons. The formulas for three well known waxes are given below, with the carboxylic acid moiety colored red and the alcohol colored blue.

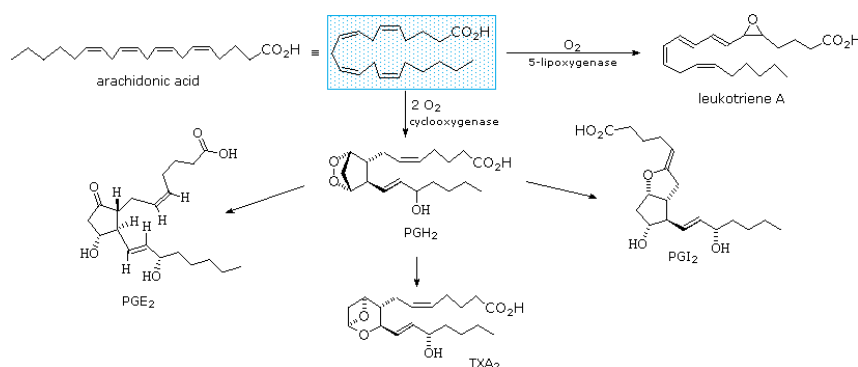
spermaceti		beeswax		carnauba wax
$\text{CH}_3(\text{CH}_2)_{14}\text{CO}_2\text{-}$ $(\text{CH}_2)_{15}\text{CH}_3$		$\text{CH}_3(\text{CH}_2)_{24}\text{CO}_2\text{-}$ $(\text{CH}_2)_{29}\text{CH}_3$		$\text{CH}_3(\text{CH}_2)_{30}\text{CO}_2\text{-}$ $(\text{CH}_2)_{33}\text{CH}_3$

Waxes are widely distributed in nature. The leaves and fruits of many plants have waxy coatings, which may protect them from dehydration and small predators. The feathers of birds and the fur of some animals have similar coatings which serve as a water repellent. Carnuba wax is valued for its toughness and water resistance.

### Prostaglandins Thromboxanes & Leukotrienes

The members of this group of structurally related natural hormones have an extraordinary range of biological effects. They can lower gastric secretions, stimulate uterine contractions, lower blood pressure, influence blood clotting and induce asthma-like allergic responses. Because their genesis in body tissues is tied to the metabolism of the essential fatty acid arachadonic acid (5,8,11,14-eicosatetraenoic acid) they are classified as **eicosanoids**. Many properties of the common drug aspirin result from its effect on the cascade of reactions associated with these hormones.

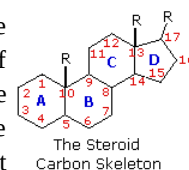
The metabolic pathways by which arachidonic acid is converted to the various eicosanoids are complex and will not be discussed here. A rough outline of some of the transformations that take place is provided below. It is helpful to view arachadonic acid in the coiled conformation shown in the shaded box.



Leukotriene A is a precursor to other leukotriene derivatives by epoxide opening reactions. The prostaglandins are given systematic names that reflect their structure. The initially formed peroxide  $\text{PGH}_2$  is a common intermediate to other prostaglandins, as well as thromboxanes such as  $\text{TXA}_2$ . **To see a model of prostaglandin  $\text{PGE}_2$  Click Here.**

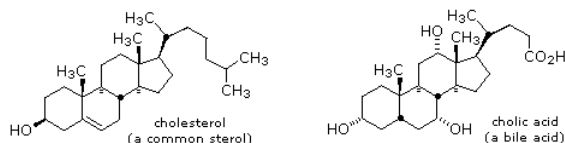
### Steroids

The important class of lipids called **steroids** are actually metabolic derivatives of terpenes, but they are customarily treated as a separate group. Steroids may be recognized by their tetracyclic skeleton, consisting of three fused six-membered and one five-membered ring, as shown in the diagram to the right. The four rings are designated A, B, C & D as noted, and the peculiar numbering of the ring carbon atoms (shown in red) is the result of an earlier misassignment of the structure. The substituents designated by R are often alkyl groups, but may also have functionality. The R group at the A:B ring fusion is most commonly methyl or hydrogen, that at the C:D fusion is usually methyl. The substituent at C-17 varies considerably, and is usually larger than methyl if it is not a functional group. The most common locations of functional groups are C-3, C-4, C-7, C-11, C-12 & C-17. Ring A is sometimes aromatic. Since a number of tetracyclic triterpenes also have this tetracyclic structure, it cannot be considered a unique identifier.



Steroids are widely distributed in animals, where they are associated with a number of physiological processes. Examples of some important steroids are shown in the following diagram. Different kinds of steroids will be displayed by clicking the "[Toggle Structures](#)" button under the diagram. Norethindrone is a synthetic steroid, all the other examples occur naturally. A common strategy in pharmaceutical chemistry is to take a natural compound, having certain desired biological properties together with undesired side effects, and to modify its structure to enhance the desired characteristics and diminish the undesired. This is sometimes accomplished by trial and error.

The generic steroid structure drawn above has seven chiral stereocenters (carbons 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14 & 17), which means that it may have as many as 128 stereoisomers. With the exception of C-5, natural steroids generally have a single common configuration. This is shown in the last of the toggled displays, along with the preferred conformations of the rings.



Typical Animal Steroids

Toggle Structures

Chemical studies of the steroids were very important to our present understanding of the configurations and conformations of six-membered rings. Substituent groups at different sites on the tetracyclic skeleton will have axial or equatorial orientations that are fixed because of the rigid structure of the trans-fused rings. This fixed orientation influences chemical reactivity, largely due to the greater steric hindrance of axial groups versus their equatorial isomers. Thus an equatorial hydroxyl group is esterified more rapidly than its axial isomer.

**To see a model of the steroid cholesterol** [Click Here](#)

## Contributors

- William Reusch, Professor Emeritus ([Michigan State U.](#)), [Virtual Textbook of Organic Chemistry](#)

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