

11.3: Unique Properties of Liquids

Learning Objectives

- To describe the unique properties of liquids.

Although you have been introduced to some of the interactions that hold molecules together in a liquid, we have not yet discussed the consequences of those interactions for the bulk properties of liquids. We now turn our attention to three unique properties of liquids that intimately depend on the nature of intermolecular interactions: surface tension, capillary action, and viscosity.

Surface Tension

We stated in [Section 11.0](#) that liquids tend to adopt the shapes of their containers. Why, then, do small amounts of water on a freshly waxed car form raised droplets instead of a thin, continuous film? The answer lies in a property called *surface tension*, which depends on intermolecular forces.

[Figure 11.3.1](#) presents a microscopic view of a liquid droplet. A typical molecule in the *interior* of the droplet is surrounded by other molecules that exert attractive forces from all directions. Consequently, there is no *net* force on the molecule that would cause it to move in a particular direction. In contrast, a molecule on the *surface* experiences a net attraction toward the drop because there are no molecules on the outside to balance the forces exerted by adjacent molecules in the interior. Because a sphere has the smallest possible surface area for a given volume, intermolecular attractive interactions between water molecules cause the droplet to adopt a spherical shape. This maximizes the number of attractive interactions and minimizes the number of water molecules at the surface. Hence raindrops are almost spherical, and drops of water on a waxed (nonpolar) surface, which does not interact strongly with water, form round beads (see the chapter opener photo). A dirty car is covered with a mixture of substances, some of which are polar. Attractive interactions between the polar substances and water cause the water to spread out into a thin film instead of forming beads.

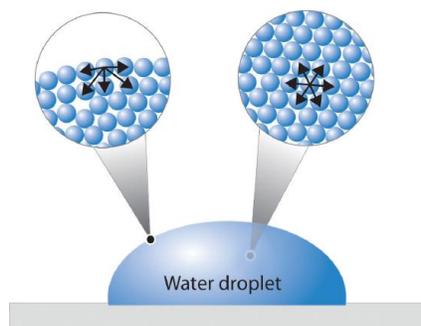


Figure 11.3.1 A Representation of Surface Tension in a Liquid Molecules at the surface of water experience a net attraction to other molecules in the liquid, which holds the surface of the bulk sample together. In contrast, those in the interior experience uniform attractive forces..

The same phenomenon holds molecules together at the surface of a bulk sample of water, almost as if they formed a skin. When filling a glass with water, the glass can be overfilled so that the level of the liquid actually extends *above* the rim. Similarly, a sewing needle or a paper clip can be placed on the surface of a glass of water where it “floats,” even though steel is much denser than water (part (a) in [Figure 11.3.2](#)). Many insects take advantage of this property to walk on the surface of puddles or ponds without sinking (part (b) in [Figure 11.3.2](#)).

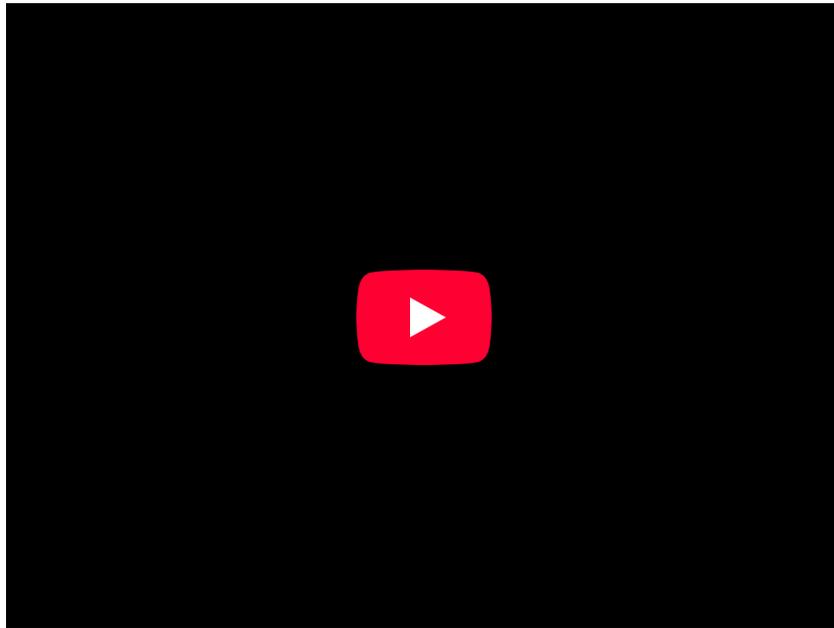
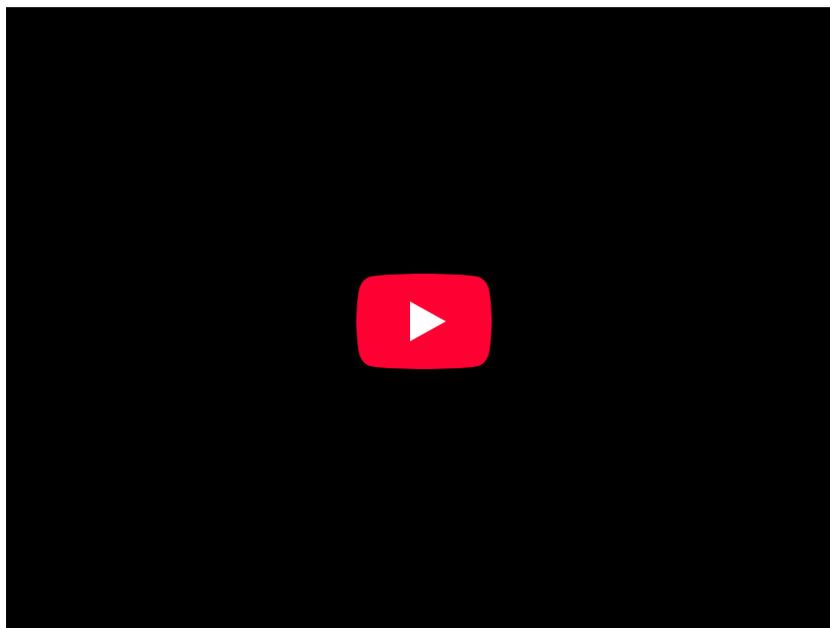


Figure 11.3.2 The Effects of the High Surface Tension of Liquid Water (a) A paper clip can “float” on water because of surface tension (from [Christopher Rozitis](#)).



(b) Surface tension also allows insects such as this water strider to “walk on water.”

Such phenomena are manifestations of surface tension. The energy required to increase the surface area of a liquid by a certain amount. Surface tension is measured in units of energy per area (e.g., J/m^2), which is defined as the energy required to increase the surface area of a liquid by a specific amount. Surface tension is therefore measured as energy per unit area, such as joules per square meter (J/m^2) or dyne per centimeter (dyn/cm), where $1 \text{ dyn} = 1 \times 10^{-5} \text{ N}$. The values of the surface tension of some representative liquids are listed in [Table 11.3.1](#). Note the correlation between the surface tension of a liquid and the strength of the intermolecular forces: the stronger the intermolecular forces, the higher the surface tension. For example, water, with its strong intermolecular hydrogen bonding, has one of the highest surface tension values of any liquid, whereas low-boiling-point organic molecules, which have relatively weak intermolecular forces, have much lower surface tensions. Mercury is an apparent anomaly, but its very high surface tension is due to the presence of strong metallic bonding, which we will discuss in more detail in [Chapter 12](#).

Table 11.3.1 Surface Tension, Viscosity, Vapor Pressure (at 25°C Unless Otherwise Indicated), and Normal Boiling Points of Common Liquids

Substance	Surface Tension ($\times 10^{-3} J/m^2$)	Viscosity (mPa·s)	Vapor Pressure (mmHg)	Normal Boiling Point (°C)
Organic Compounds				
diethyl ether	17	0.22	531	34.6

Substance	Surface Tension ($\times 10^{-3}$ J/m ²)	Viscosity (mPa·s)	Vapor Pressure (mmHg)	Normal Boiling Point (°C)
<i>n</i> -hexane	18	0.30	149	68.7
acetone	23	0.31	227	56.5
ethanol	22	1.07	59	78.3
ethylene glycol	48	16.1	~0.08	198.9
Liquid Elements				
bromine	41	0.94	218	58.8
mercury	486	1.53	0.0020	357
Water				
0°C	75.6	1.79	4.6	—
20°C	72.8	1.00	17.5	—
60°C	66.2	0.47	149	—
100°C	58.9	0.28	760	—

Adding soaps and detergents that disrupt the intermolecular attractions between adjacent water molecules can reduce the surface tension of water. Because they affect the surface properties of a liquid, soaps and detergents are called surface-active agents, or surfactants. Substances (surface-active agents), such as soaps and detergents, that disrupt the attractive intermolecular interactions between molecules of a polar liquid, thereby reducing the surface tension of the liquid. In the 1960s, US Navy researchers developed a method of fighting fires aboard aircraft carriers using “foams,” which are aqueous solutions of fluorinated surfactants. The surfactants reduce the surface tension of water below that of fuel, so the fluorinated solution is able to spread across the burning surface and extinguish the fire. Such foams are now used universally to fight large-scale fires of organic liquids.

Capillary Action

Intermolecular forces also cause a phenomenon called capillary action. The tendency of a polar liquid to rise against gravity into a small-diameter glass tube, which is the tendency of a polar liquid to rise against gravity into a small-diameter tube (a *capillary*), as shown in [Figure 11.3.3](#). When a glass capillary is put into a dish of water, water is drawn up into the tube. The height to which the water rises depends on the diameter of the tube and the temperature of the water but *not* on the angle at which the tube enters the water. The smaller the diameter, the higher the liquid rises.

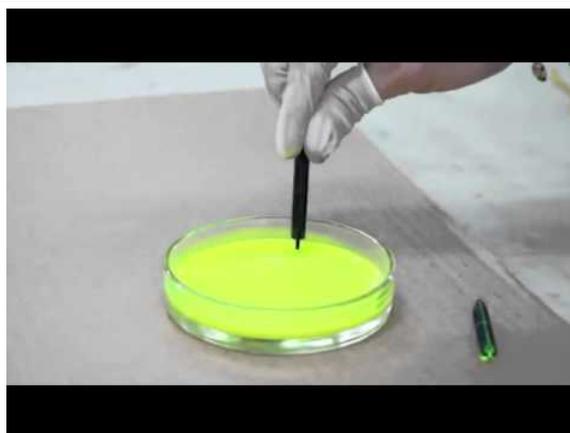
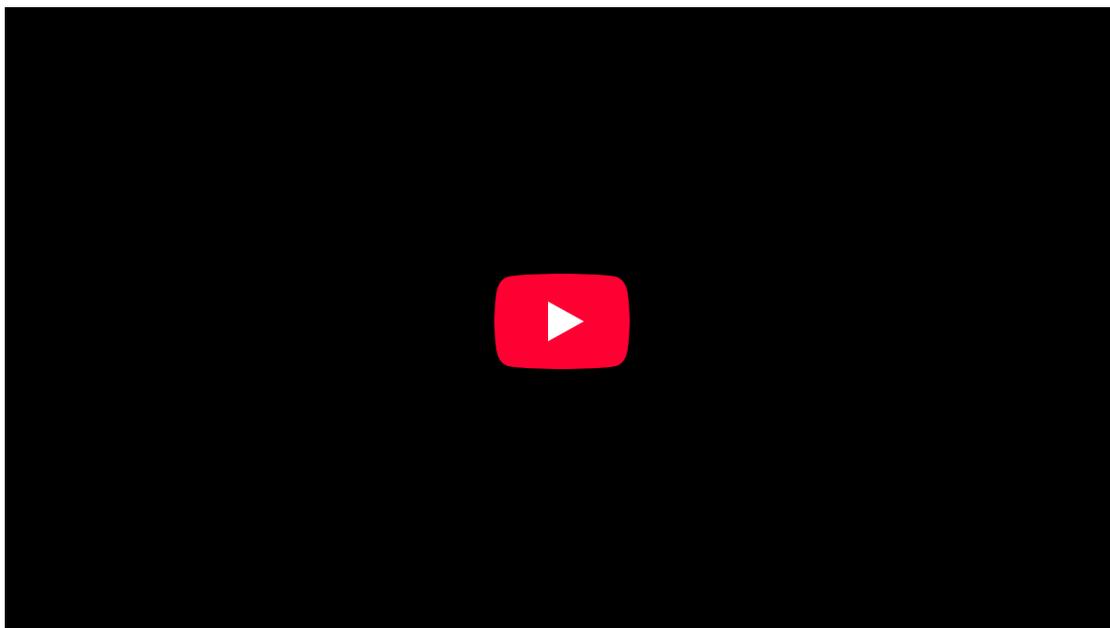


Figure 11.3.3 The Phenomenon of Capillary Action When a capillary is placed in liquid ink the ink rises up into the capillary. The smaller the diameter of the capillary, the higher the water rises. The height of the water does *not* depend on the angle at which the capillary is tilted.

Of course, you can see the same phenomena in anything with narrow channels, like bricks

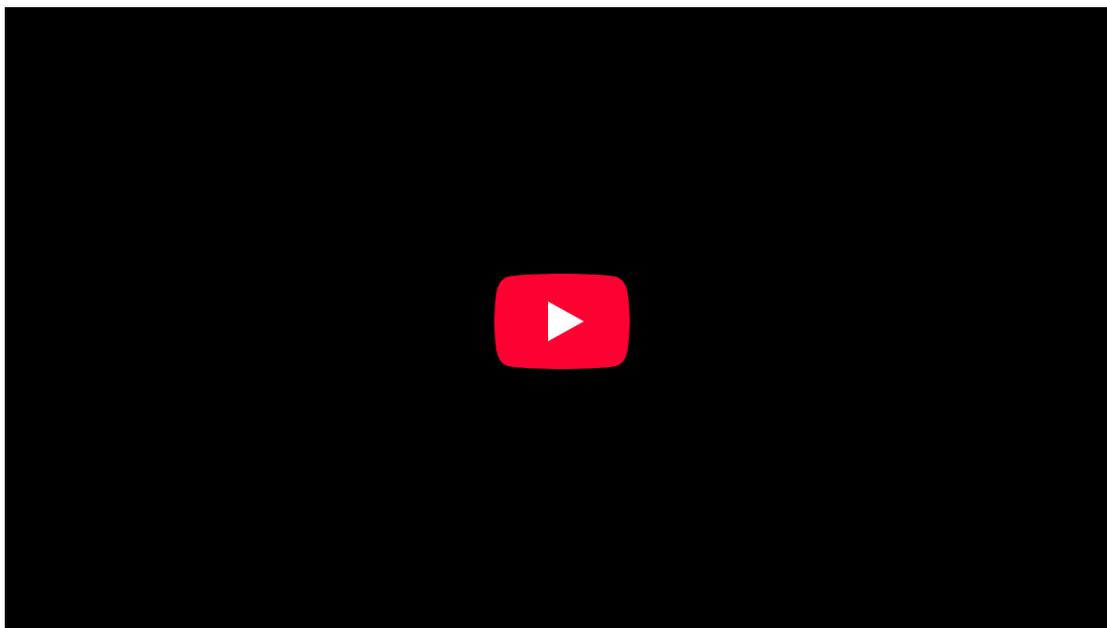


Figure 11.3.4 The Phenomenon of Capillary Action: Water rises through a brick in a time lapse video

Capillary action is the net result of two opposing sets of forces: cohesive forces (The intermolecular forces that hold a liquid together,) which are the intermolecular forces that hold a liquid together, and adhesive forces (The attractive intermolecular forces between a liquid and the substance comprising the surface of a capillary,) which are the attractive forces between a liquid and the substance that composes the capillary. Water has both strong adhesion to glass, which contains polar SiOH groups, and strong intermolecular cohesion. When a glass capillary is put into water, the surface tension due to cohesive forces constricts the surface area of water within the tube, while adhesion between the water and the glass creates an upward force that maximizes the amount of glass surface in contact with the water. If the adhesive forces are stronger than the cohesive forces, as is the case for water, then the liquid in the capillary rises to the level where the downward force of gravity exactly balances this upward force. If, however, the cohesive forces are stronger than the adhesive forces, as is the case for mercury and glass, the liquid pulls itself down into the capillary below the surface of the bulk liquid to minimize contact with the glass (part (a) in [Figure 11.3.5](#)). The upper surface of a liquid in a tube is called the meniscus (The upper surface of the liquid in a tube.), and the shape of the meniscus depends on the relative strengths of the cohesive and adhesive forces. In liquids such as water, the meniscus is concave; in liquids such as mercury, however, which have very strong cohesive forces and weak adhesion to glass, the meniscus is convex (part (b) in [Figure 11.3.5](#)).

Note the Pattern

Polar substances are drawn up a glass capillary and generally have a concave meniscus.

Scenario: Two test tubes are partially filled, one with water and the other with mercury. The tube with water forms a concave meniscus because the adhesive forces between it and the glass make the water molecules want to spread across the glass. The mercury however forms a convex meniscus because the cohesive forces are greater, so the mercury tries to bead and avoid the glass.

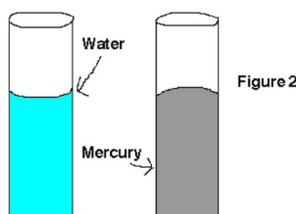


Figure 11.3.5 The Effects of Capillary Action This drawing illustrates the shape of the meniscus and the relative height of a mercury column when a glass capillary is put into liquid mercury. The meniscus is convex and the surface of the liquid inside the tube is *lower* than the level of the liquid outside the tube. Because water adheres strongly to the polar surface of glass, it has a concave meniscus, whereas mercury, which does not adhere to the glass, has a convex meniscus.

Fluids and nutrients are transported up the stems of plants or the trunks of trees by capillary action. Plants contain tiny rigid tubes composed of cellulose, to which water has strong adhesion. Because of the strong adhesive forces, nutrients can be transported from the roots to the tops of trees that are more than 50 m tall. Cotton towels are also made of cellulose; they absorb water because the tiny tubes act like capillaries and “wick” the water away from your skin. The moisture is absorbed by the entire fabric, not just the layer in contact with your body.

Viscosity



Viscosity (η) The resistance of a liquid to flow. is the resistance of a liquid to flow. Some liquids, such as gasoline, ethanol, and water, flow very readily and hence have a *low viscosity*. Others, such as motor oil, molasses, and maple syrup, flow very slowly and have a *high viscosity*. The two most common methods for evaluating the viscosity of a liquid are (1) to measure the time it takes for a quantity of liquid to flow through a narrow vertical tube and (2) to measure the time it takes steel balls to fall through a given volume of the liquid. The higher the viscosity, the slower the liquid flows through the tube and the steel balls fall. Viscosity is expressed in units of the poise (mPa·s); the higher the number, the higher the viscosity. The viscosities of some representative liquids are listed in [Table 10.3.1](#) and show a correlation between viscosity and intermolecular forces. Because a liquid can flow only if the molecules can move past one another with minimal resistance, strong intermolecular attractive forces make it more difficult for molecules to move with respect to one another. The addition of a second hydroxyl group to ethanol, for example, which produces ethylene glycol (HOCH₂CH₂OH), increases the viscosity 15-fold. This effect is due to the increased number of hydrogen bonds that can form between hydroxyl groups in adjacent molecules, resulting in dramatically stronger intermolecular attractive forces.

There is also a correlation between viscosity and molecular shape. Liquids consisting of long, flexible molecules tend to have higher viscosities than those composed of more spherical or shorter-chain molecules. The longer the molecules, the easier it is for them to become “tangled” with one another, making it more difficult for them to move past one another. London dispersion forces also increase with chain length. Due to a combination of these two effects, long-chain hydrocarbons (such as motor oils) are highly viscous.

Note the Pattern

Viscosity increases as intermolecular interactions or molecular size increases.

Motor oils and other lubricants demonstrate the practical importance of controlling viscosity. The oil in an automobile engine must effectively lubricate under a wide range of conditions, from subzero starting temperatures to the 200°C that oil can reach in an engine in the heat of the Mojave Desert in August. Viscosity decreases rapidly with increasing temperatures because the kinetic energy of the molecules increases, and higher kinetic energy enables the molecules to overcome the attractive forces that prevent

the liquid from flowing. As a result, an oil that is thin enough to be a good lubricant in a cold engine will become too “thin” (have too low a viscosity) to be effective at high temperatures. The viscosity of motor oils is described by an SAE (Society of Automotive Engineers) rating ranging from SAE 5 to SAE 50 for engine oils: the lower the number, the lower the viscosity. So-called *single-grade oils* can cause major problems. If they are viscous enough to work at high operating temperatures (SAE 50, for example), then at low temperatures, they can be so viscous that a car is difficult to start or an engine is not properly lubricated. Consequently, most modern oils are *multigrade*, with designations such as SAE 20W/50 (a grade used in high-performance sports cars), in which case the oil has the viscosity of an SAE 20 oil at subzero temperatures (hence the W for winter) and the viscosity of an SAE 50 oil at high temperatures. These properties are achieved by a careful blend of additives that modulate the intermolecular interactions in the oil, thereby controlling the temperature dependence of the viscosity. Many of the commercially available oil additives “for improved engine performance” are highly viscous materials that increase the viscosity and effective SAE rating of the oil, but overusing these additives can cause the same problems experienced with highly viscous single-grade oils.

Example 11.3.1

Based on the nature and strength of the intermolecular cohesive forces and the probable nature of the liquid–glass adhesive forces, predict what will happen when a glass capillary is put into a beaker of SAE 20 motor oil. Will the oil be pulled up into the tube by capillary action or pushed down below the surface of the liquid in the beaker? What will be the shape of the meniscus (convex or concave)? (Hint: the surface of glass is lined with Si–OH groups.)

Given: substance and composition of the glass surface

Asked for: behavior of oil and the shape of meniscus

Strategy:

A Identify the cohesive forces in the motor oil.

B Determine whether the forces interact with the surface of glass. From the strength of this interaction, predict the behavior of the oil and the shape of the meniscus.

Solution:

A Motor oil is a nonpolar liquid consisting largely of hydrocarbon chains. The cohesive forces responsible for its high boiling point are almost solely London dispersion forces between the hydrocarbon chains. **B** Such a liquid cannot form strong interactions with the polar Si–OH groups of glass, so the surface of the oil inside the capillary will be lower than the level of the liquid in the beaker. The oil will have a convex meniscus similar to that of mercury.

Exercise

Predict what will happen when a glass capillary is put into a beaker of ethylene glycol. Will the ethylene glycol be pulled up into the tube by capillary action or pushed down below the surface of the liquid in the beaker? What will be the shape of the meniscus (convex or concave)?

Answer: Capillary action will pull the ethylene glycol up into the capillary. The meniscus will be concave.

Summary

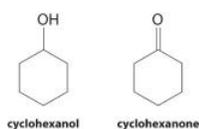
Surface tension is the energy required to increase the surface area of a liquid by a given amount. The stronger the intermolecular interactions, the greater the surface tension. **Surfactants** are molecules, such as soaps and detergents, that reduce the surface tension of polar liquids like water. **Capillary action** is the phenomenon in which liquids rise up into a narrow tube called a capillary. It results when **cohesive forces**, the intermolecular forces in the liquid, are weaker than **adhesive forces**, the attraction between a liquid and the surface of the capillary. The shape of the **meniscus**, the upper surface of a liquid in a tube, also reflects the balance between adhesive and cohesive forces. The **viscosity** of a liquid is its resistance to flow. Liquids that have strong intermolecular forces tend to have high viscosities.

Key Takeaway

- Surface tension, capillary action, and viscosity are unique properties of liquids that depend on the nature of intermolecular interactions.

Conceptual Problems

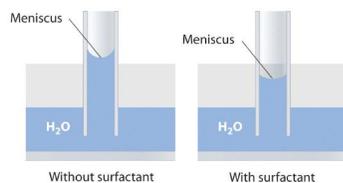
1. Why is a water droplet round?
2. How is the environment of molecules on the surface of a liquid droplet different from that of molecules in the interior of the droplet? How is this difference related to the concept of surface tension?
3. Explain the role of intermolecular and intramolecular forces in surface tension.
4. A mosquito is able to walk across water without sinking, but if a few drops of detergent are added to the water, the insect will sink. Why?
5. Explain how soaps or surfactants decrease the surface tension of a liquid. How does the meniscus of an aqueous solution in a capillary change if a surfactant is added? Illustrate your answer with a diagram.
6. Of CH_2Cl_2 , hexane, and ethanol, which has the lowest viscosity? Which has the highest surface tension? Explain your reasoning in each case.
7. At 25°C , cyclohexanol has a surface tension of 32.92 mN/m^2 , whereas the surface tension of cyclohexanone, which is very similar chemically, is only 25.45 mN/m^2 . Why is the surface tension of cyclohexanone so much less than that of cyclohexanol?



8. What is the relationship between
 1. surface tension and temperature?
 2. viscosity and temperature?
 Explain your answers in terms of a microscopic picture.
9. What two opposing forces are responsible for capillary action? How do these forces determine the shape of the meniscus?
10. Which of the following liquids will have a concave meniscus in a glass capillary? Explain your reasoning.
 1. pentane
 2. diethylene glycol ($\text{HOCH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{OCH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{OH}$)
 3. carbon tetrachloride
11. How does viscosity depend on molecular shape? What molecular features make liquids highly viscous?

Answers

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
5. Adding a soap or a surfactant to water disrupts the attractive intermolecular interactions between water molecules, thereby decreasing the surface tension. Because water is a polar molecule, one would expect that a soap or a surfactant would also disrupt the attractive interactions responsible for adhesion of water to the surface of a glass capillary. As shown in the sketch, this would decrease the height of the water column inside the capillary, as well as making the meniscus less concave.



- 6.
7. As the structures indicate, cyclohexanol is a polar substance that can engage in hydrogen bonding, much like methanol or ethanol; consequently, it is expected to have a higher surface tension due to stronger intermolecular interactions.

- 8.
9. Cohesive forces are the intermolecular forces that hold the molecules of the liquid together, while adhesive forces are the attractive forces between the molecules of the liquid and the walls of the capillary. If the adhesive forces are stronger than the cohesive forces, the liquid is pulled up into the capillary and the meniscus is concave. Conversely, if the cohesive forces are stronger than the adhesive forces, the level of the liquid inside the capillary will be lower than the level outside the capillary, and the meniscus will be convex.
- 10.
11. Viscous substances often consist of molecules that are much longer than they are wide and whose structures are often rather flexible. As a result, the molecules tend to become tangled with one another (much like overcooked spaghetti), which decreases the rate at which they can move through the liquid.

Numerical Problems

1. The viscosities of five liquids at 25°C are given in the following table. Explain the observed trends in viscosity.

Compound	Molecular Formula	Viscosity (mPa·s)
benzene	C ₆ H ₆	0.604
aniline	C ₆ H ₅ NH ₂	3.847
1,2-dichloroethane	C ₂ H ₄ Cl ₂	0.779
heptane	C ₇ H ₁₆	0.357
1-heptanol	C ₇ H ₁₅ OH	5.810

2. The following table gives values for the viscosity, boiling point, and surface tension of four substances. Examine these data carefully to see whether the data for each compound are internally consistent and point out any obvious errors or inconsistencies. Explain your reasoning.

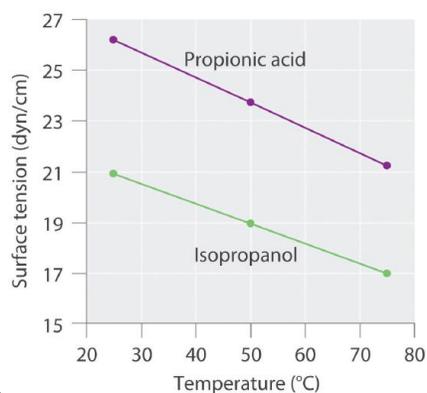
Compound	Viscosity (mPa·s at 20°C)	Boiling Point (°C)	Surface Tension (dyn/cm at 25°C)
A	0.41	61	27.16
B	0.55	65	22.55
C	0.92	105	36.76
D	0.59	110	28.53

3. Surface tension data (in dyn/cm) for propanoic acid (C₃H₆O₂), and 2-propanol (C₃H₈O), as a function of temperature, are given in the following table. Plot the data for each compound and explain the differences between the two graphs. Based on these data, which molecule is more polar?

Compound	25°C	50°C	75°C
propanoic acid	26.20	23.72	21.23
2-propanol	20.93	18.96	16.98

Answer

- 1.
- 2.



3.

The plots of surface tension versus temperature for propionic acid and isopropanol have essentially the same slope, but at all temperatures the surface tension of propionic acid is about 30% greater than for isopropanol. Because surface tension is a measure of the cohesive forces in a liquid, these data suggest that the cohesive forces for propionic acid are significantly greater than for isopropanol. Both substances consist of polar molecules with similar molecular masses, and the most important intermolecular interactions are likely to be dipole–dipole interactions. Consequently, these data suggest that propionic acid is more polar than isopropanol.

Contributors

- Anonymous

[Video at 11.3.2a by Christopher Rozitis @ YouTube](#)

[Video at 11.3.2b by Cambridge University @ YouTube](#)

[Video at 11.3.3 by Fink Feed Systems @ YouTube](#)

[Video at 11.3.4 by Safeguard Europe @ YouTube](#)

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