12.4: Buffers are Solutions that Resist pH Change

Learning Objective

- Define *buffer* and describe how it reacts with an acid or a base.

Weak acids are relatively common, even in the foods we eat. But we occasionally come across a strong acid or base, such as stomach acid, that has a strongly acidic pH of 1–2. By definition, strong acids and bases can produce a relatively large amount of hydrogen or hydroxide ions and, as a consequence, have marked chemical activity. In addition, very small amounts of strong acids and bases can change the pH of a solution very quickly. If 1 mL of stomach acid [which we will approximate as 0.05 M HCl(aq)] is added to the bloodstream, and if no correcting mechanism is present, the pH of the blood would go from about 7.4 to about 4.9—a pH that is not conducive to life. Fortunately, the body has a mechanism for minimizing such dramatic pH changes.

This mechanism involves a buffer, a solution that resists dramatic changes in pH. Buffers do so by being composed of certain pairs of solutes: either a weak acid plus a salt derived from that weak acid, or a weak base plus a salt of that weak base. For example, a buffer can be composed of dissolved acetic acid ($HC_2H_3O_2$, a weak acid) and sodium acetate ($NaC_2H_3O_2$, a salt derived from that acid). Another example of a buffer is a solution containing ammonia (NH_3, a weak base) and ammonium chloride (NH_4Cl, a salt derived from that base).

Let us use an acetic acid–sodium acetate buffer to demonstrate how buffers work. If a strong base—a source of $\mathrm{OH^-(aq)}$ ions—is added to the buffer solution, those hydroxide ions will react with the acetic acid in an acid-base reaction:

$$\mathrm{HC_2H_3O_2(aq) + OH^-(aq) \rightarrow H_2O(\ell) + C_2H_3O_2^-(aq)} \tag{12.4.1}$$

Rather than changing the pH dramatically by making the solution basic, the added hydroxide ions react to make water, and the pH does not change much.

> Many people are aware of the concept of buffers from *buffered aspirin*, which is aspirin that also has magnesium carbonate, calcium carbonate, magnesium oxide, or some other salt. The salt acts like a base, while aspirin is itself a weak acid.

If a strong acid—a source of H^+ ions—is added to the buffer solution, the H^+ ions will react with the anion from the salt. Because $HC_2H_3O_2$ is a weak acid, it is not ionized much. This means that if lots of hydrogen ions and acetate ions (from sodium acetate) are present in the same solution, they will come together to make acetic acid:

$$\mathrm{H^+(aq) + C_2H_3O_2^-(aq) \rightarrow HC_2H_3O_2(aq)} \tag{12.4.2}$$

Rather than changing the pH dramatically and making the solution acidic, the added hydrogen ions react to make molecules of a weak acid. Figure $12.4.1$ illustrates both actions of a buffer.

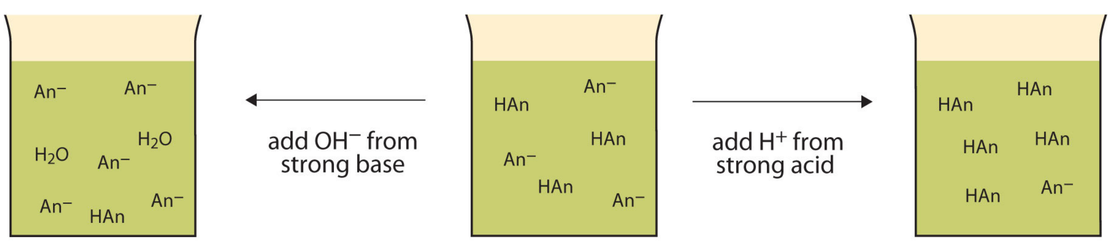

Figure 12.4.1: The Action of Buffers. Buffers can react with both strong acids (top) and strong bases (bottom) to minimize large changes in pH.

Buffers made from weak bases and salts of weak bases act similarly. For example, in a buffer containing NH_3 and NH_4Cl, ammonia molecules can react with any excess hydrogen ions introduced by strong acids:

$$\mathrm{NH_3(aq) + H^+(aq) \rightarrow NH_4^+(aq)} \tag{12.4.3}$$

while the **ammonium ion** ($\mathrm{NH_4^+(aq)}$) can react with any hydroxide ions introduced by strong bases:

$$\mathrm{NH_4^+(aq) + OH^-(aq) \rightarrow NH_3(aq) + H_2O(\ell)} \tag{12.4.4}$$

Example 12.4.1: Making Buffer Solutions

Which solute combinations can make a buffer solution? Assume that all are aqueous solutions.

a. $HCHO_2$ and $NaCHO_2$
b. HCl and $NaCl$
c. CH_3NH_2 and CH_3NH_3Cl
d. NH_3 and $NaOH$

Solution

a. Formic acid ($HCHO_2$) is a weak acid, while $NaCHO_2$ is the salt made from the anion of the weak acid—the formate ion (CHO_2^-). The combination of these two solutes would make a buffer solution.
b. Hydrochloric acid (HCl) is a strong acid, not a weak acid, so the combination of these two solutes would not make a buffer solution.
c. Methylamine (CH_3NH_2) is like ammonia with one of its hydrogen atoms substituted with a CH_3 (methyl) group. Because it is not on our list of strong bases, we can assume that it is a weak base. The compound CH_3NH_3Cl is a salt made from that weak base, so the combination of these two solutes would make a buffer solution.
d. Ammonia (NH_3) is a weak base, but NaOH is a strong base. The combination of these two solutes would not make a buffer solution.

Exercise 12.4.1

Which solute combinations can make a buffer solution? Assume that all are aqueous solutions.

a. $NaHCO_3$ and $NaCl$
b. H_3PO_4 and NaH_2PO_4
c. NH_3 and $(NH_4)_3PO_4$
d. $NaOH$ and $NaCl$

Answer a

Yes.

Answer b

No. Need a weak acid or base and a salt of its conjugate base or acid.

Answer c

Yes.

Answer d

No. Need a weak base or acid.

Buffers work well only for limited amounts of added strong acid or base. Once either solute is all reacted, the solution is no longer a buffer, and rapid changes in pH may occur. We say that a buffer has a certain **capacity**. Buffers that have more solute dissolved in them to start with have larger capacities, as might be expected.

Human blood has a buffering system to minimize extreme changes in pH. One buffer in blood is based on the presence of HCO_3^- and H_2CO_3 [H_2CO_3 is another way to write $CO_2(aq)$]. With this buffer present, even if some stomach acid were to find its way directly into the bloodstream, the change in the pH of blood would be minimal. Inside many of the body's cells, there is a buffering system based on phosphate ions.

Career Focus: Blood Bank Technology Specialist

At this point in this text, you should have the idea that the chemistry of blood is fairly complex. Because of this, people who work with blood must be specially trained to work with it properly.

A blood bank technology specialist is trained to perform routine and special tests on blood samples from blood banks or transfusion centers. This specialist measures the pH of blood, types it (according to the blood's ABO+/− type, Rh factors, and other typing schemes), tests it for the presence or absence of various diseases, and uses the blood to determine if a patient has any of several medical problems, such as anemia. A blood bank technology specialist may also interview and prepare donors to give blood and may actually collect the blood donation.

Blood bank technology specialists are well trained. Typically, they require a college degree with at least a year of special training in blood biology and chemistry. In the United States, training must conform to standards established by the American Association of Blood Banks.

Key Takeaway

- A buffer is a solution that resists sudden changes in pH.

Contributions & Attributions