

11.3: Structures and Names of Alkanes

Learning Objectives

- To identify and name simple (straight-chain) alkanes given formulas and write formulas for straight-chain alkanes given their names.

We begin our study of organic chemistry with the hydrocarbons, the simplest organic compounds, which are composed of carbon and hydrogen atoms only. As we noted, there are several different kinds of hydrocarbons. They are distinguished by the types of bonding between carbon atoms and the properties that result from that bonding. Hydrocarbons with only carbon-to-carbon single bonds (C–C) and existing as a continuous chain of carbon atoms also bonded to hydrogen atoms are called alkanes (or saturated hydrocarbons). *Saturated*, in this case, means that each carbon atom is bonded to four other atoms (hydrogen or carbon)—the most possible; there are no double or triple bonds in the molecules.

The word *saturated* has the same meaning for hydrocarbons as it does for the dietary fats and oils: the molecule has no carbon-to-carbon double bonds (C=C).

We previously introduced the three simplest alkanes—methane (CH₄), ethane (C₂H₆), and propane (C₃H₈) and they are shown again in Figure 11.3.1.

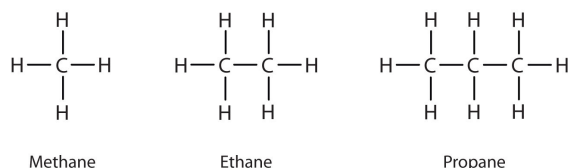


Figure 11.3.1: The Three Simplest Alkanes

The flat representations shown do not accurately portray bond angles or molecular geometry. Methane has a tetrahedral shape that chemists often portray with wedges indicating bonds coming out toward you and dashed lines indicating bonds that go back away from you. An ordinary solid line indicates a bond in the plane of the page. Recall that the VSEPR theory correctly predicts a tetrahedral shape for the methane molecule (Figure 11.3.2).

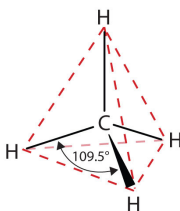


Figure 11.3.2: The Tetrahedral Methane Molecule

Methane (CH₄), ethane (C₂H₆), and propane (C₃H₈) are the beginning of a series of compounds in which any two members in a sequence differ by one carbon atom and two hydrogen atoms—namely, a CH₂ unit. The first 10 members of this series are given in Table 11.3.1.

Table 11.3.1: The First 10 Straight-Chain Alkanes

Name	Molecular Formula (C _n H _{2n + 2})	Condensed Structural Formula	Number of Possible Isomers
methane	CH ₄	CH ₄	—
ethane	C ₂ H ₆	CH ₃ CH ₃	—
propane	C ₃ H ₈	CH ₃ CH ₂ CH ₃	—
butane	C ₄ H ₁₀	CH ₃ CH ₂ CH ₂ CH ₃	2
pentane	C ₅ H ₁₂	CH ₃ CH ₂ CH ₂ CH ₂ CH ₃	3

Name	Molecular Formula (C_nH_{2n+2})	Condensed Structural Formula	Number of Possible Isomers
hexane	C_6H_{14}	$CH_3CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_3$	5
heptane	C_7H_{16}	$CH_3CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_3$	9
octane	C_8H_{18}	$CH_3CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_3$	18
nonane	C_9H_{20}	$CH_3CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_3$	35
decane	$C_{10}H_{22}$	$CH_3CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_2CH_3$	75

Consider the series in Figure 11.3.3. The sequence starts with C_3H_8 , and a CH_2 unit is added in each step moving up the series. Any family of compounds in which adjacent members differ from each other by a definite factor (here a CH_2 group) is called a homologous series. The members of such a series, called *homologs*, have properties that vary in a regular and predictable manner. The principle of *homology* gives organization to organic chemistry in much the same way that the periodic table gives organization to inorganic chemistry. Instead of a bewildering array of individual carbon compounds, we can study a few members of a homologous series and from them deduce some of the properties of other compounds in the series.

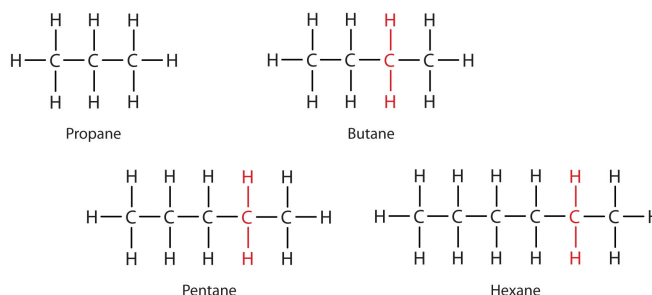


Figure 11.3.3: Members of a Homologous Series. Each succeeding formula incorporates one carbon atom and two hydrogen atoms more than the previous formula.

The principle of homology allows us to write a general formula for alkanes: C_nH_{2n+2} . Using this formula, we can write a molecular formula for any alkane with a given number of carbon atoms. For example, an alkane with eight carbon atoms has the molecular formula $C_8H_{(2 \times 8) + 2} = C_8H_{18}$.

Key Takeaway

- Simple alkanes exist as a homologous series, in which adjacent members differ by a CH_2 unit.

This page titled 11.3: Structures and Names of Alkanes is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Eden Francis via source content that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.

- 11.2: Structures and Names of Alkanes by Anonymous is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 3.0. Original source: <https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/introduction-to-chemistry-general-organic-and-biological>.