

Carbon Dioxide Physiological Hazards

“Not just an asphyxiant!”

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is a substance that is commonly used in a variety of food and beverage applications, industrial and chemical processes and other applications. It is important to be aware that the substance can pose serious health hazards if not handled properly.

This document is a revision of the 2017 edition and provides an overview of the physiological hazards of CO₂ and outlines safe handling practices to help prevent accidents and injuries.

Carbon dioxide

Carbon dioxide is naturally present in air at a level of approximately 400 parts per million (0.04%). Carbon dioxide is a non-toxic gas, but at elevated concentrations acts as an asphyxiant as it causes oxygen depletion.

However, carbon dioxide hazards and physiological effects are much more complex compared to other gases classified as asphyxiants. Namely, in contrast to other asphyxiant gases, carbon dioxide is a normal product of metabolism in human beings and takes an active part in pulmonary gas exchange principle when people breathe. It forms a part of the human body’s normal chemical environment as an active messenger substance in the linking of respiration, circulation, and vascular response to the demands of human metabolism.

What happens when you breathe?

When air enters the lungs (see Fig. 1), it goes through a maze of smaller and smaller tubes until it reaches tiny air sacs called alveoli. Here oxygen from the air diffuses across the alveolar membrane into the blood, while at the same time the carbon dioxide from the blood enters the alveoli.

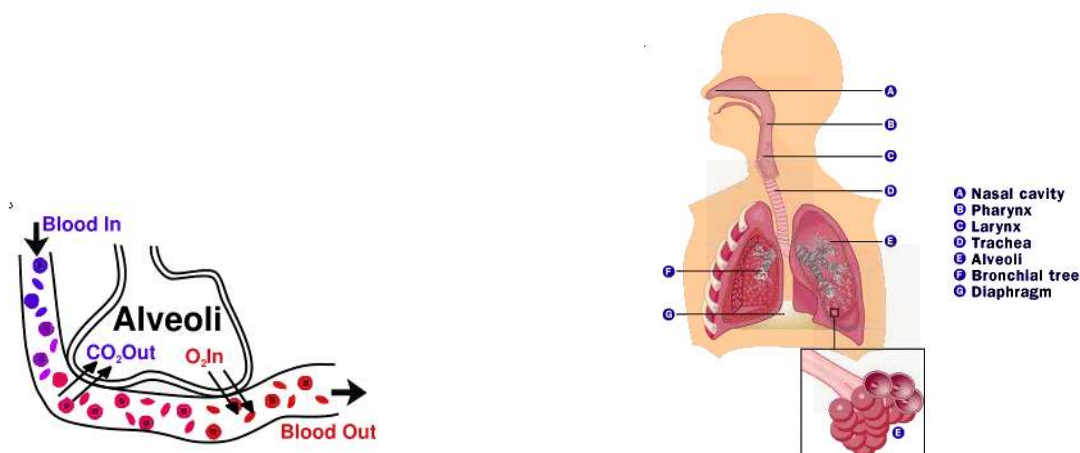


Fig. 1: Pulmonary gas exchange principle

The human respiratory control system controls the gas pulmonary exchange and maintains the correct level of carbon dioxide in the arterial blood and tissue fluids, consequently maintaining the acidity of the tissue and cellular fluids at the level for essential metabolic reactions and membrane functions.

Changes in the normal carbon dioxide concentration in the blood and tissue fluids can be damaging for human beings. Elevated concentration of carbon dioxide in the ambient air will trigger such changes.

Hazard of carbon dioxide intoxication

Inhaled carbon dioxide produces the same physiological effects as metabolically produced carbon dioxide in human beings.

In normal physiological circumstances, there is a higher concentration of carbon dioxide in the blood than in the lungs, forming a concentration gradient, where blood carbon dioxide diffuses into the lungs and is exhaled later.

Higher concentration of carbon dioxide in the inhaled air will lower the carbon dioxide concentration gradient and compromise the diffusion of carbon dioxide from the blood to the lungs' alveoli. The concentration of the carbon dioxide in the blood will increase. The body will respond by using respiratory and adaptive processes to adjust the change. However, these processes are limited.

As the carbon dioxide concentration in the ambient air we are breathing increases, lower quantities of carbon dioxide leave the blood stream. Consequently, the concentration of carbon dioxide in the blood and tissues increases, the pH of the blood falls, to which the human body is extremely sensitive. Elevated blood and tissue levels of carbon dioxide are termed hypercapnia or hypercobia.

Additionally, carbon dioxide concentration raises in the lungs and the space for fresh air / oxygen in the lungs decreases. Without oxygen, we cannot live.

This effect is called intoxication. Carbon dioxide intoxication is entirely independent of the effects of oxygen deficiency (i.e. asphyxiation), therefore the oxygen content in the air is not an effective indication of the danger of intoxication.

For example, as a result of a carbon dioxide release in the air, it is possible to have a slightly lower oxygen concentration of 19%, which on its own is not harmful, but an increased carbon dioxide concentration of 10%, which presents a very dangerous situation (see below).

Individual tolerances can vary widely, depending on the physical condition of the person and the temperature and humidity of the air, but as a general guide, the effects of inhaling varying concentration of carbon dioxide are likely to be as follows:

Carbon dioxide - physiological effects

Volume carbon dioxide in air	Likely effects
1 – 1.5 %	Slight effect on chemical metabolism after exposures of several hours
3 %	The gas is weakly narcotic at this level, giving rise to deeper breathing, reduced hearing ability, coupled with headache, an increase in blood pressure and pulse rate.
4 – 5 %	Stimulation of the respiratory centre occurs resulting in deeper and more rapid breathing. Signs of intoxication will become more evident after 30 minutes exposure.
5 – 10 %	Breathing becomes more laborious with headache and loss of judgement.
10 – 100 %	When the carbon dioxide concentration increases above 10%, unconsciousness will occur in under one minute and unless prompt action is taken, further exposure to these high levels will eventually result in death.

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Avoid fatal mistakes when analysing the ambient air

Due to the health risks associated with carbon dioxide the average exposure of a healthy employee during an eight-hour working shift should not exceed 0.5 % (5,000 ppm).

A common mistake is to only measure the oxygen concentration instead of carbon dioxide. The consequence of this is shown in the following example:

Scenario:

Following a release of carbon dioxide into the air in a factory the oxygen concentration was measured on oxygen monitors as falling from the normal 21% to 19%.

What does this mean?

Based on the composition of air (21% oxygen and 79 % nitrogen; ratio of 1:3.76) the 2% reduction in oxygen corresponds to a total amount of 9.5% air (2% oxygen and 7.5% nitrogen) which has been replaced by the carbon dioxide that was released.

Therefore, a reduction of “only” 2% oxygen results in a concentration of 9.5% carbon dioxide and according to the table above, this represents a significant hazard of intoxication to any people in the area.

Are your workplaces safe?

The beneficial applications of carbon dioxide in industry are varied, including:

- Food industry (packaging)
- Beverage industry (carbonation)
- Agricultural and biological applications
- Caffeine removal
- Wine making
- Pharmaceutical or chemical processing
- Polymers and plastics
- Pneumatic systems
- Blasting (Cleaning)
- Fire extinguisher
- Welding
- Lasers
- Refrigerant
- Dry ice (applications)
- Oil recovery
- Pest control
- Waste water treatment
- Food freezing

Carbon dioxide can be used safely provided sensible precautions are in place.

SAC therefore recommend that the risk of intoxication is considered for each workplace or application where carbon dioxide is used and that companies:

- Provide employees with information on the intoxication hazards of carbon dioxide, including the safety data sheet;
- Carry out a detailed job hazard analysis where carbon dioxide is used;
- Train and educate employees on the specific hazards of intoxication and preventive measures.

When, as a result of the job hazard analysis, a risk of intoxication is considered possible, one or more of the following measures should be implemented:

- Ensure effective ventilation, especially in lower levels of the room;
- Install a carbon dioxide monitor and alarm system, ensure people are trained in the response required to any alarm. Location of the monitors must be evaluated based on the job hazard analysis;
- Carry out regular maintenance and calibration of the carbon dioxide monitor and alarm system, as well as of any mechanical ventilation systems;
- Ensure that if the carbon dioxide monitor and alarm system is operating at sub-zero temperatures, it is designed for operating in those conditions and for the application or process;

and

... Always remember: Carbon Dioxide is “not just an asphyxiant!”

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Further information:

EIGA Doc. 67 *Carbon Dioxide Cylinders at Users' Premises*. www.eiga.eu

EIGA Doc. 66 *Refrigerated Carbon Dioxide Storage at Users' Premises*. www.eiga.eu

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