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## *Measuring Toxicity and Assessing Risk*

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### Introduction

Toxicology is the science of poisons and has as its focus the study of the adverse effects of chemicals on living organisms. Although almost any substance in sufficient quantities (even water) can be a poison, toxicology focuses primarily on substances that can cause these adverse effects when administered in relatively small quantities. Knowledge of the relative toxicity of substances is fundamental to all applications of toxicology, from development of a new drug to the modeling of the effects of an environmental pollutant. This chapter describes approaches used by toxicologists to determine the toxicity of a substance. We consider principles of the dose vs. response relationship, methods used to evaluate toxicity in laboratory animals, and subsequent statistical analyses for quantitation of toxicity. We also discuss the use of toxicity data in assessing the risks of exposure to potentially hazardous substances.

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### Chemistry of Toxicants

Knowledge of the chemistry of a poison is of primary importance because it is a major determinant in the solubility and reactivity of the substance. Chemistry can dictate the *vehicle* used to administer the substance in testing, and can predict to some extent the duration of the test, as well as any potential products of biotransformation (metabolism). For small molecules, knowledge of chemistry is relatively simple to gain by examining the chemical formula and performing tests such as an octanol/water partitioning experiment to find the relative lipid solubility. However, the coming generation of drugs will be composed of many large polymeric compounds such as proteins and nucleic acids, which are more challenging to study chemically. There is also a trend to return to botanical products, which are often highly complex mixtures with multiple active ingredients. This can complicate the administration and interpretation of testing for toxicity.

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## Toxicity Testing Methods

A wealth of information can be gathered from toxicity testing by carefully observing animals during and following exposure. These data may provide evidence for the mode of action of the substance and provide clues as to which physiological system, organs, and tissues could be affected.

Although specific protocols for toxicity testing have been developed by various regulatory agencies (such as FDA and EPA), they share many characteristics in common. Of course, in any study, the handling and treatment of animals must be humane and must be the same for all animals in the study, whether they are in treated or control groups. Animals may be tagged for identification, using either simple numbered, metal *ear tags*, or more sophisticated devices such as *electronic transponding implants*. Animals must be housed in clean, comfortable conditions with access to adequate food and water. Typically, animals are housed in conventional, box-type cages, although in some cases specialized cages such as metabolism cages may be used. These cages are equipped with a separator for collection and measurement of urine and feces, so that consumption of food and water can be measured more accurately.

In a typical study, *body weight* of the test animals is measured either daily or periodically. Animals are observed for *behavior* (comparing behavior of treated with control animals) and *symptomology* (such as tremors or convulsions, for example). During the exposure period, animals are monitored closely for symptoms of poisoning, as well as timing of appearance of those symptoms, which might suggest the mechanism of poisoning of the substance. A slow onset of poisoning, for example, might suggest a *bioactivation* of the substance to a more toxic *metabolite*, or product, which accumulates as the *parent substance* is converted.

Following an exposure period, the animals are sacrificed and *necropsy* is performed. This is a procedure in which the treated and control animals are dissected and organs are weighed and examined for toxic effects in gross morphology and physiology. Sections of tissue samples may be sliced on a *microtome* and examined under the microscope for evidence of *histopathology* (which is any abnormality in cell or tissue). Tissue samples may also be analyzed for the presence of biochemical indicators of pathology.

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## Factors to Be Considered in Planning Toxicity Testing

There are several questions that must be answered in determining the toxicity of a chemical substance. Among these are: