ALKALOSIS

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November 7, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *ALKALOSIS*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=66046

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ALKALOSIS

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Medicine, Physiology, Biochemistry

1. Core Definition

Alkalosis constitutes a critical physiological disturbance characterized by a pathological increase in the alkalinity of the blood and other bodily fluids, signifying a state of profound imbalance within the body's intricate acid-base homeostasis mechanisms. This condition is formally diagnosed when the arterial blood pH level rises above the upper boundary of the narrow normal range, which is meticulously maintained between 7.35 and 7.45. A persistent pH measurement exceeding 7.45 indicates a systemic shift toward alkalinity, often resulting from either an excessive accumulation of bicarbonate ions (the primary base component) or, conversely, a debilitating loss of hydrogen ions (acid components) from the extracellular fluid. The human body is equipped with robust buffering systems--primarily the bicarbonate buffer system--which utilize the lungs to regulate carbonic acid (via carbon dioxide excretion) and the kidneys to regulate bicarbonate and hydrogen ion excretion. Alkalosis occurs when these delicate compensatory mechanisms are either overwhelmed by an extreme exogenous or endogenous insult or fail to function efficiently, leading to widespread cellular dysfunction and neurological distress.

The resulting increase in pH fundamentally alters enzyme function and cellular metabolism throughout the body, most notably affecting neurological and neuromuscular systems. The clinical effects of alkalosis, even when mild, can be debilitating; for instance, as noted in clinical observations, the condition can cause extreme muscle fatigue and cognitive faults, severely limiting an individual's capacity to perform daily functions or work. Because the body strives ceaselessly for neutrality, the development of alkalosis necessitates the deployment of secondary compensatory responses, such as hypoventilation (in metabolic alkalosis) or increased renal excretion of bicarbonate (in respiratory alkalosis), though these responses are often insufficient to fully resolve the primary disturbance without clinical intervention aimed at the root cause.

2. Etiology and Classification

Alkalosis is broadly classified into two principal categories based on the initial cause of the pH disturbance: **Respiratory Alkalosis** and **Metabolic Alkalosis**. This distinction is critical for guiding diagnostic testing and treatment strategies, as each type involves a distinct primary physiological derangement affecting the components of the carbonic acid buffer system (H?CO? / HCO??). Accurate classification requires analysis of the arterial blood gas (ABG) parameters, specifically pH, partial pressure of carbon dioxide (PCO?), and bicarbonate (HCO??) concentrations, to determine whether the primary cause is respiratory (related to PCO?) or metabolic (related to HCO??).

Respiratory Alkalosis arises from a primary reduction in the partial pressure of carbon dioxide (PCO?) in the arterial blood, a condition known as hypocapnia. This is invariably caused by alveolar hyperventilation--breathing too rapidly or too deeply--which results in the excessive "blowing off" of CO?, thereby lowering the concentration of carbonic acid (H?CO?) in the blood and consequently raising the pH. Common causes include acute anxiety, panic attacks, hypoxia due to high altitude exposure, pulmonary embolism, fever, pain, or the inappropriate setting of mechanical ventilation parameters. The body attempts to compensate metabolically by increasing the renal excretion of bicarbonate, a process that takes hours to days to become maximally effective, leading to an acute or chronic classification of respiratory alkalosis.

Metabolic Alkalosis, conversely, results from a primary increase in the plasma bicarbonate concentration or a significant loss of non-volatile acids (hydrogen ions) from the body. This is frequently associated with conditions causing volume contraction and hypochloremia, such as severe and prolonged vomiting (loss of gastric hydrochloric acid), or the aggressive use of loop or thiazide diuretics which promote the renal loss of hydrogen and chloride ions. Metabolic alkalosis can also occur due to mineralocorticoid excess, as seen in conditions like hyperaldosteronism, which promotes increased renal hydrogen ion secretion. The respiratory compensation for metabolic alkalosis involves hypoventilation (a compensatory reduction in breathing rate) to retain CO?, though this compensation is limited by the body's essential need to maintain adequate tissue oxygenation.

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3. Pathophysiology of Respiratory Alkalosis

The core pathophysiological event in respiratory alkalosis is the rapid reduction of arterial PCO? due to sustained hyperventilation. The immediate fall in PCO? shifts the equilibrium of the bicarbonate buffer system, leading to a swift decrease in hydrogen ion concentration and a corresponding elevation in pH. This rapid pH change has profound systemic effects, particularly within the central nervous system. Because CO? is a potent cerebral vasodilator, its rapid reduction causes significant cerebral vasoconstriction, leading to reduced cerebral blood flow. This reduced perfusion is responsible for many of the acute neurological symptoms experienced by patients, including lightheadedness, dizziness, visual disturbances, and confusion.

Furthermore, the elevated pH significantly increases the binding of calcium to plasma proteins, thereby reducing the concentration of physiologically active, ionized calcium (hypocalcemia). Even though total calcium levels might remain normal, the functional hypocalcemia dramatically increases the excitability of peripheral nerves and muscles. This heightened neuromuscular irritability manifests clinically as paresthesias (tingling sensations, particularly around the mouth and extremities), muscle cramps, and, in severe cases, the characteristic involuntary muscle spasms known as tetany, highlighting the systemic danger posed by even transient acid-base disturbances.

4. Pathophysiology of Metabolic Alkalosis

Metabolic alkalosis is often conceptually categorized into two subtypes: chloride-responsive and chloride-resistant, based on the volume status of the patient and their response to saline administration. The **chloride-responsive** subtype, typically associated with volume contraction and hypokalemia (low potassium), is maintained because of the concurrent depletion of chloride and effective circulating volume. The kidney attempts to conserve sodium and volume, but since chloride is unavailable (due to loss via vomiting or diuretics), it must reabsorb sodium alongside bicarbonate, thus perpetuating the alkalosis. Infusion of saline (sodium chloride) corrects the volume deficit and provides chloride, allowing the kidneys to excrete the excess bicarbonate and correct the alkalosis.

Conversely, **chloride-resistant** metabolic alkalosis is generally associated with normovolemia or hypervolemia and is maintained by excessive mineralocorticoid activity (e.g., primary or secondary hyperaldosteronism) or severe potassium depletion. In these cases, the high mineralocorticoid levels lead to persistent renal loss of hydrogen ions and potassium in exchange for sodium reabsorption, regardless of the chloride concentration. Because the primary defect is hormonal or renal intrinsic, saline infusion fails to correct the underlying cause, necessitating specific treatments such as potassium repletion or the administration of mineralocorticoid antagonists like spironolactone. Understanding this pathophysiological dichotomy is essential for effective clinical management.

5. Clinical Manifestations and Sequelae

The clinical presentation of alkalosis is frequently non-specific but is primarily dominated by symptoms related to the nervous system and neuromuscular irritability, exacerbated by the relative decrease in ionized calcium levels. Common symptoms include profound fatigue, headache, restlessness, and cognitive deficits ranging from mild confusion to stupor in severe, uncompensated cases. The heightened excitability of the peripheral nervous system often results in paresthesias, particularly noticeable in the hands, feet, and perioral region, serving as a key diagnostic clue during physical examination.

Severe or rapidly developing alkalosis poses significant risks to cardiovascular stability. The condition can increase myocardial irritability and is strongly associated with the precipitation or exacerbation of cardiac arrhythmias, particularly in patients with pre-existing heart disease or electrolyte abnormalities (such as concomitant hypokalemia). Furthermore, chronic or severe metabolic alkalosis can potentially lead to increased tissue hypoxia. Although respiratory compensation attempts to raise PCO?, resulting in reduced alveolar ventilation, this retention of CO? limits the overall oxygen content delivered to the tissues, potentially worsening outcomes in critically ill patients.

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6. Diagnostic Procedures

Diagnosis of alkalosis relies fundamentally on laboratory assessment, prioritizing Arterial Blood Gas (ABG) analysis. The ABG provides the definitive confirmation of alkalemia (pH > 7.45) and identifies the primary disturbance by measuring PCO? and HCO?? levels. A low PCO? accompanying high pH indicates respiratory alkalosis, while a high HCO?? accompanying high pH indicates metabolic alkalosis. Once the primary disturbance is identified, further testing is required to determine the underlying etiology and compensatory status.

In cases of metabolic alkalosis, essential follow-up tests include serum electrolyte panels, urine electrolyte analysis (especially urine chloride concentration), and evaluation of fluid volume status. Measuring the urine chloride concentration is crucial for differentiating between chloride-responsive (20 mEq/L) causes. Additionally, assessments for underlying conditions, such as screening for hyperaldosteronism (measurement of plasma renin activity and aldosterone levels) or evaluating renal function, are necessary steps to establish a precise diagnosis and formulate a targeted therapeutic approach.

7. Management and Treatment

The successful treatment of alkalosis hinges entirely upon the accurate identification and correction of the underlying causal mechanism, rather than solely attempting to buffer the elevated pH. In the case of **Respiratory Alkalosis**, management often involves addressing the root cause of hyperventilation; for anxiety-driven hyperventilation, simple techniques like breathing into a paper bag (to re-breathe exhaled CO?) or reassurance may suffice. If the cause is hypoxia, the underlying respiratory or cardiac failure must be treated. In mechanically ventilated patients, the ventilator settings must be adjusted to decrease the respiratory rate or tidal volume, thereby increasing the effective PCO?.

Treatment for **Metabolic Alkalosis** is dictated by the chloride-responsiveness classification. For the common chloride-responsive subtype, the primary intervention involves the intravenous administration of isotonic saline (0.9% sodium chloride) to restore depleted extracellular volume and provide chloride ions, facilitating the renal excretion of excess bicarbonate. Concurrent correction of associated hypokalemia is vital. For chloride-resistant alkalosis, treatment focuses on pharmacological antagonism of mineralocorticoids (using spironolactone or amiloride) or, in rare, severe, refractory cases, the administration of acidifying agents such as hydrochloric acid infusion or dialytic therapies may be required to rapidly lower the systemic pH and mitigate life-threatening neurological or cardiac complications.

Further Reading

Alkalosis (Wikipedia)

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Acid-Base Physiology
Metabolic Alkalosis: A Comprehensive Review (NCBI Bookshelf)

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