Gen Phys
Excitable Cells Active Properties

Introduction

In Lesson #6 *Excitable Cells Resting Properties*, we ended by defining "threshold stimulus." "Threshold" is the membrane potential at which special channels that are sensitive to voltage changes, open. Until the threshold potential is reached, every one of these channels fails to open. When threshold is crossed, all of these channels open. There is a small delay, as we will see, but cell membranes are considered as either below threshold (none of these channels opens) or above threshold (all of these channels open). The opening of all of these special channels initiates the consistent, reproducible, and predictable **all-or-nothing** electrical tracing called the **action potential.** It is the activity (opening and closing) and to which ion the channel is permeable (Na^+ or K^+) that determines what the action potential will look like.

When the membrane becomes permeable to a particular ion, the established concentration gradient for that ion (the chemical force) allows ions of that kind to move down the concentration gradient. As more of that ion are moved down the concentration gradient, the cell membrane voltage changes to balance that concentration gradient by moving towards that ion's Nernst potential.

The more channels that are open to that ion determine how quickly those ions can flow, how quickly the membrane voltage changes to that ion's Nernst potential. If two channels are open, each to a different ion, then both ions will flow down their concentration gradient. The one that "wins" is the one with the highest membrane conductance - whoever has the most channels open. Consider an example.

The Nernst for Na^+ is +65. The Nernst for K^+ is -95. Na^+ has a chemical force that drives it into the cell. K^+ has a chemical force that drives it out of the cell. If the membrane becomes very permeable to Na^+, Na^+ rushes into the cell (down the concentration gradient) and the membrane voltage goes briskly towards the Nernst potential for Na^+. If the membrane becomes very permeable to K^+, K^+ rushes OUT of the cell (down its concentration gradient) and the membrane voltage goes briskly towards the Nernst potential for K^+. If the membrane conductance were equal to both, the membrane voltage would be the average of the two. As soon as the membrane conductance of either one exceeds the other, the membrane voltage will tend towards the winner. How fast it gets there is about how much of a membrane conductance difference there is.

A skeletal muscle action potential starts with a burst of Na^+ membrane conductance, then a sudden cessation of Na^+ membrane conductance. Along side this rapid open rapid close of Na^+channels there is a slower opening of K^+ channels.

Gen Phys

Excitable Cells Active Properties
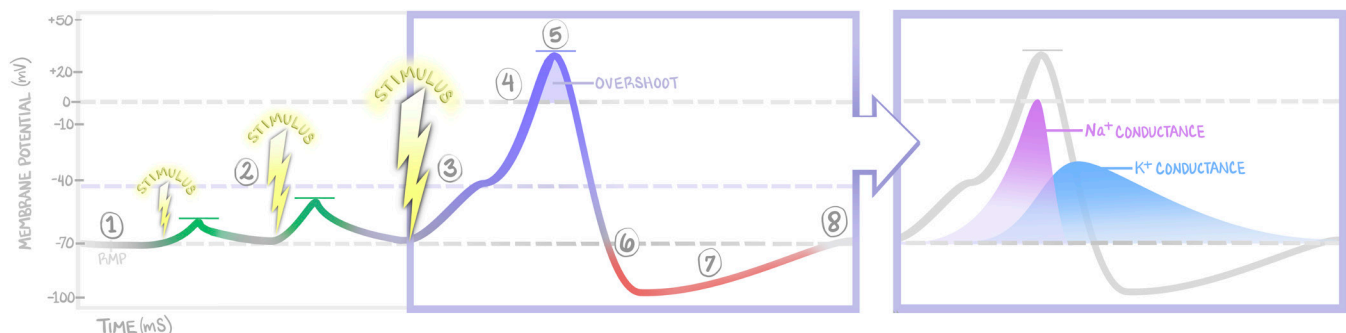
Action Potential

Figure 7.1: The Action Potential and Conductances
The following sequence of events happens every time an action potential is triggered. It is all-or-nothing. The action potential is triggered and these steps happen, or the action potential is not triggered and none of these events happens. Use this figure to follow along with the text. .

1: Resting membrane potential, where the cell is at rest

2: A the stimulus is delivered depolarizing the cell. This is subthreshold, so it's a graded response.

3: A threshold stimulus is delivered. When threshold is reached, a mass of **voltage-gated sodium channels opens**. This greatly increases the membrane conducatnce to sodium. Voltage-gated potassium channels have also reached their threshold, but are slower to open. There is nothing to oppose the sodium conductance.

4: Voltage-gated sodium channels are rapid to open and also rapid to close, dropping the membrane's conductance of Na^+ to zero. This is called **inactivation.** As the Na^+ channels are inactivating, **voltage-gated potassium channels** are opening. Conductance to K^+ increases.

5: At the peak, conductance of potassium overtakes conductance of Na^+. All Na^+ channels have inactivated. More K^+ open. Any depolarization above 0 is called **overshoot**.

6: With only K^+ channels open, rapid **hyperpolarization** occurs. There is no Na^+ conductance to oppose K^+ conductance, so the cell goes below the resting potential all the way to the Nernst of K^+. These K^+ channels close only with hyperpolarization.

Gen Phys
Excitable Cells Active Properties

7: Hyperpolarization closes the K^+ channels. It also returns the Na+ channels to their resting positions - neither open nor inactivated. No Na^+ flows. Some K^+ flows because as they were slow to turn on, these channels are slow to turn off. As they turn off, the cell tends towards the resting potential.

8: All voltage gated channels are in their resting position, restoring the membrane potential to be dependent only on the leak K^+ channels and the Na^+/K^+-ATPase. This restores the electrochemical gradient to the resting potential. The cell is at rest.

Channels

Voltage-gated Na^+ channels have both an activation gate and an inactivation gate. The channels are named by the state of each gate. Closed or open activation gate. Active or inactive inactivation gate there are three states; closed-active is the resting state, open-active has ions flowing through it, open-inactive has no ions flowing through it and it never will until reset back to closed-active.

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The **activation gate** is **closed at rest**. Opening of the activation gate greatly increases conductance to sodium. The activation gate is **opened by threshold voltage** and is closed by both **threshold voltage and time**. That is, as the membrane potential moves from resting to threshold (threshold is about -60 mV for these channels), the activation gate opens. The gate will not reset to the closed resting position until the threshold is crossed again until sufficient hyperpolarization is achieved—from a voltage above threshold to a voltage below threshold. Even below threshold, the activation gate is closed by a combination of hyperpolarization and time. It is not instantaneous.

The **inactivation gate** is **open at rest**, and closing the inactivation gate decreases conductance to sodium. The inactivation gate is **closed by threshold voltage** (only takes slightly longer to close than the activation gate takes to open) and is opened by both **threshold voltage and time**. The inactivation gate, like the activation gate, returns to its resting position only with hyperpolarization and time.
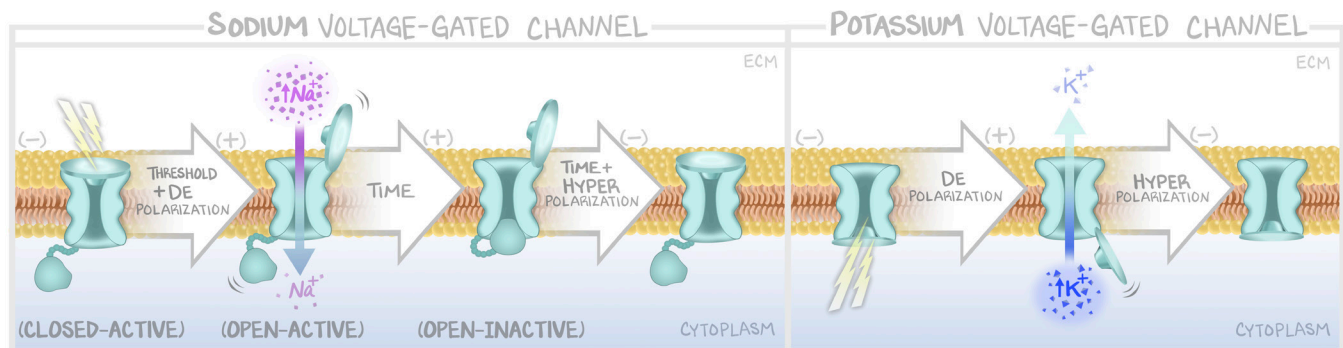
Gen Phys
Excitable Cells Active Properties

Figure 7.2: Voltage-Gated Channels
Voltage-gated sodium channels have both an activation gate (closed at rest, opened by depolarization) and an inactivation gate (open at rest, closed with depolarization), such that when threshold is reached, the conductance to sodium is increased massively, but only very briefly. The inactivation gate will remain closed until there is a hyperpolarizing stimulus to reset the gate. Voltage-gated potassium channels have an activation gate only, such that if the system were to activate (threshold was reached) the Na^+ channels would inactivate, and the potassium channels would remain open—the default state is to reset the system.

Voltage-gated K^+ channels also open by **depolarization** across threshold and close by **hyperpolarization** across threshold and time. These channels are **slower to open** but also **slower to close**. Unlike voltage-gated sodium channels, they have no inactivation gate. This setup ensures that an excitable cell will depolarize when reaching threshold, but if something goes wrong, the sustained signal is K^+ (Na^+ inactivates, K^+ doesn't), hyperpolarizing the cell, silencing further action potentials.

Refractory Period

Because action potentials are dependent on reaching threshold, which is induced by Na^+ conductance, there's a phenomenon called a **refractory period**. The **absolute refractory period** is the time between crossing threshold on depolarization and crossing threshold on hyperpolarization. All voltage-gated Na^+ channels that open (activation gate opens) will all also inactivate (inactivation gate). The inactivation gate remains closed, the channel unable to open again until repolarization across threshold occurs. This is the time when a second action potential is impossible regardless of how much stimulus is applied. Adding more depolarizing stimulus to a closed-inactive channel will only result in keeping it in the closed-inactive state.

Gen Phys

Excitable Cells Active Properties

Opening of the inactivation gate and closure of the activation gate (resetting to the resting configuration) require **hyperpolarization and time.** Both are necessary, because not all voltage-gated Na^+ channels will open at the same time, they won't inactivate at the same time, and they won't reset at the same time.

As the last-to-open sodium channels remain closed-inactive (soon to recover), other channels have opened sooner and closed sooner and have already returned to closed-active state. Over time, all the channels will recover to closed-active. The original threshold stimulus was determined by the number of channels ready to open. With fewer channels ready to open, but with enough channels ready to open, a sufficiently larger stimulus could reinitiate the action potential. This is the **relative refractory period**. The same magnitude of stimulus that induced the first action potential would not cause the action potential, but a stimulus of higher magnitude could induce a second action potential.
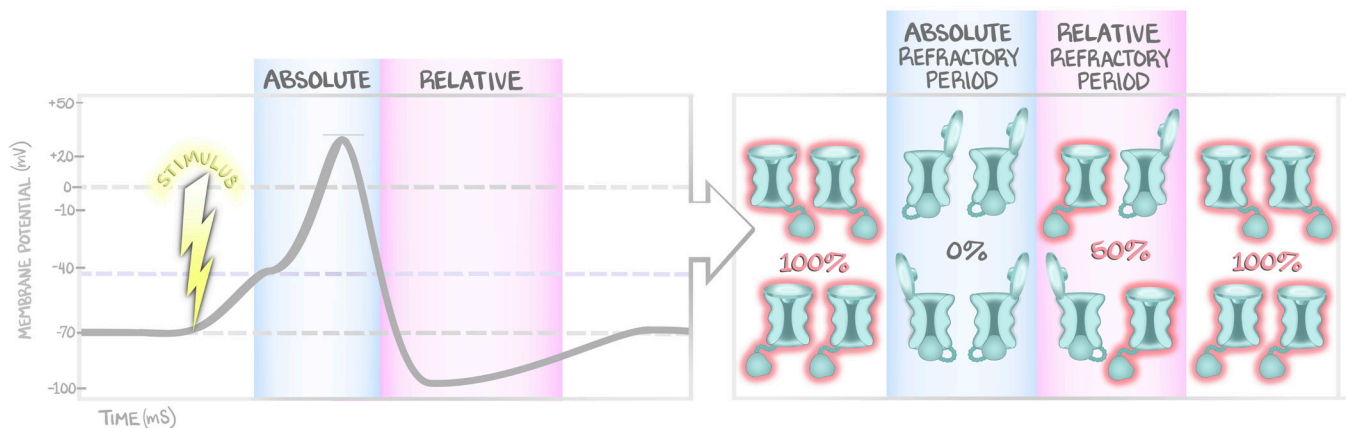

Figure 7.3: Absolute and Relative Refractory Period

There is a time (before hyperpolarization) when the sodium inactivation gates have not reset. No matter the stimulus, the inactivation gates are not open. This is the absolute refractory period. In the relative refractory period, some inactivation gates have recovered and some are still recovering, such that if a larger stimulus were applied, the population of closed-ready channels could invoke an action potential. Because there are fewer channels ready in the activation-closed inactivation-open position, a more vigorous stimulus is required to initiate another action potential from baseline.

Gen Phys

Excitable Cells Active Properties

Propagation of the Action Potential: Cable Theory

As the threshold potential is reached locally, voltage-gated sodium channels open, inducing a massive depolarization. Those voltage-gated sodium channels that are nearby that did not reach the threshold potential based on the initial stimulus (so are still ready to open) now feel the massive depolarization of the action potential. They, too, open. Farther out from the initial stimulus are other voltage-gated sodium channels that did not reach their threshold yet. But as the second region depolarizes, it brings the third region to threshold. Each successive region of tissue nearby to a massive influx undergoes the same phenomenon, which propagates the action potential down the membrane.

But transmitting the signal from one place to another (e.g., finger to brain) requires that signal be carried over vast distance. This is analogous to transmitting an electrical impulse across a transatlantic cable. As the signal moves across the cable, signal is lost to the environment. All electrical signals degrade regardless of how well the cable is made. Signal loss and degradation always occur, due to resistance (heat), travel time, and distance.
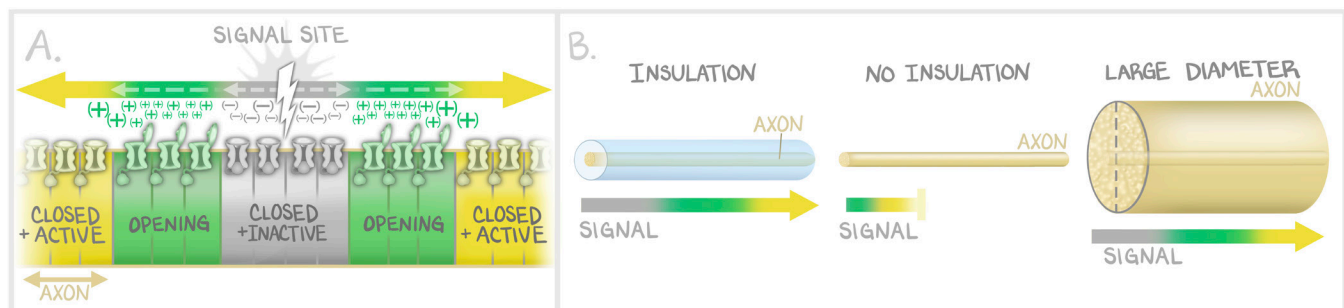

Figure 7.4: Action Potential Transmission

(a) Signal propagation can occur only from the source of the action potential away from that source, because only closed-active channels can open, while open-active channels are generating the action potential (and will soon inactivate) and closed-inactive have not yet recovered to the closed-active state. The refractory period prevents the signal from going backwards. (b) Axons ensure that the signal starts at one end and travels towards the other, as along a cable. Signal along a cable is lost; the electrical signal decays and is lost through the circumference of the cable. To maintain that signal, the cable can be made very thick (necessitating an enormous organism such as the giant squid) or insulated.

A signal can be sustained in two ways: amplifying it by a repeater, and/or limiting its degradation within the cable. Human neurons use both.

Gen Phys
Excitable Cells Active Properties

Limiting signal degradation can occur in one of two ways. Either use a really thick cable (**large radius**), or insulate it (**insulation**). Without insulation, the size of the axon must be enormous in order to prevent degradation of the signal. Giant squids and dinosaurs were huge, and likely didn't have insulation—they didn't need it because they instead went with large-radius axons ("cables"). Humans use insulation around their axons, allowing them to be super-thin, packing many into our spinal column, allowing us to be small. In the central nervous system this insulation is called **myelin**; in the peripheral nerves it's **Schwann cells**.

But since there's no such thing as perfect insulation, some signal is going to be lost, which is why human neurons also have a repeater system that enhances the signal. The **nodes of Ranvier** are breaks in the myelin sheath with a high density of sodium channels. As the action potential reaches the nodes, all the voltage-gated sodium channels open, resulting in massive depolarization. Since the tissue behind the arriving signal is still refractory, the signal cannot propagate backwards from where it came. And because the tissue in front of the arriving signal is not yet depolarized, the signal propagates unidirectionally. Between the nodes are the insulator myelin sheaths. In these regions there are no Na^+ channels—the point is that there's no conductance to any ions that are wrapped in insulation.
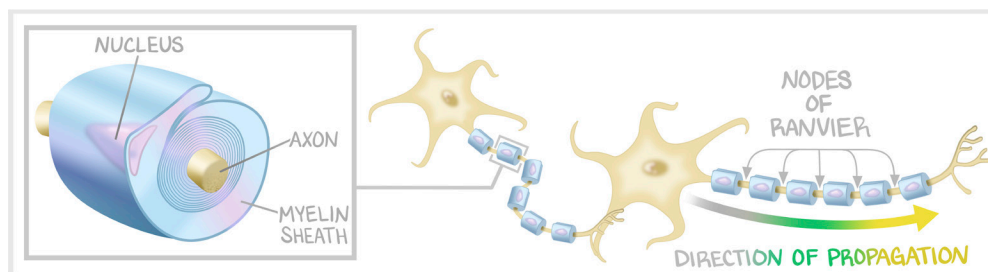

Figure 7.5: Myelin Insulators, Node Repeaters
Insulation is provided by myelin. The cell wraps its membrane around the axon, again and again, ensuring that no electrical signal is lost as long as the myelin sheath is present. In between these cells are open Nodes of Ranvier, which have a high density of sodium channels. Where there is insulation, no signal is lost. Where there is no insulation, the entire membrane is committed to regenerating the electrical signal.

Because the membranes where myelin is present have no conductance to ions, and because the insulation is not perfect, if there were no nodes (if the signal were not "re-upped"), the signal would die out after about 3 nodes' distance. This is a redundant fail-safe to keep the system propagating unidirectionally—if one node fails to reach threshold, two other nodes can induce action potential propagation, and recover the signal.