

Ion channels are crucial components of living cells. They are situated in the membranes of the cell, and allow particular ions to pass from one side of the membrane to the other. In recent years the patch clamp technique has allowed the activity of individual channels to be measured, and recombinant DNA technology has revealed fascinating detail on channel structure. Together, these technical advances have produced a great flowering of knowledge and understanding about the subject, itself leading to further breakthroughs in science and medicine. *Ion Channels* provides an introduction to this scientific endeavour. It emphasizes the molecular structure of channels as determined by gene cloning technology. This molecular approach illuminates discussions of the permeability and selectivity of channels, their gating and modulation, their responses to drugs and toxins and the human diseases caused when they do not function properly.

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David J. Aidley and Peter R. Stanfield  
Frontmatter  
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# Ion Channels

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## Molecules in Action

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## Contents

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	Preface	xi
<b>1</b>	Introduction	1
	The discovery of ion channels	3
	Different types of channel	7
<b>2</b>	Ions on the move	9
	Electricity	9
	Chemical bonds	13
	Ions in crystals	17
	Ions in solution	19
	Ions moving through membrane channels	23
<b>3</b>	Investigating channel activity	33
	Intracellular microelectrodes	33
	The voltage clamp technique	35
	Fluctuation analysis	39
	Artificial phospholipid bilayers	43
	The patch clamp technique	46
	Analysis of single channel current records	52
<b>4</b>	Molecular structures	59
	Determining channel protein sequences	59
	The nicotinic acetylcholine receptor channel	68
	Other neurotransmitter-gated channels	84
	Voltage-gated channels and their relatives	89

---

Channels with two membrane-crossing segments per subunit	99
Calcium release channels	103
Background chloride channels	106
Gap junction channels	110
Some other channels and channel-like proteins	112
<b>5</b> Permeability and selectivity	121
Permeability: theoretical approaches	121
The independent electrodiffusion model	122
Interdependence of ion movements	129
Binding site models	134
The size of the selectivity filter	144
Water in the channel pore	148
The molecular basis of selectivity	152
<b>6</b> Gating and modulation	161
Single channel kinetics	161
Ligand–receptor interactions	168
Gating of the nicotinic acetylcholine receptor channel	170
Voltage-gated channel gating	178
Gating of some other channels	199
Modulation by phosphorylation	210
Modulation by neurotransmitters and G proteins	214
Some other modulators	219
External calcium ions and surface charges	222
<b>7</b> Drugs and toxins	225
Simple models for block	226
Potassium channels	229
Voltage-gated sodium channels	236
Voltage-gated calcium channels	243
Pharmacology of some neurotransmitter-gated channels	244
<b>8</b> Dysfunctional channels in human disease	251
Voltage-gated cation channels	251
Muscle chloride channels	256
Cystic fibrosis and the CFTR	257

## CONTENTS

ix

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	The glycine receptor channel	260
	Gap junctions	261
	The calcium-release channel	261
<b>9</b>	Not the last word	263
	References	267
	Index	301

## Preface

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Ion channels are protein molecules containing aqueous pores that can open and shut to permit ion flow through cell membranes. The concept emerged in the 1950s, but the evidence for their existence was at first limited and indirect in nature. It was 1976 before the behaviour of individual channels could be observed, and 1982 before the primary structure of the first channel protein was determined. Since then work on ion channels has burgeoned and blossomed in a most remarkable way. New discoveries about them are now reported in several thousand scientific papers each year.

This book is intended to provide an introduction to this scientific endeavour. It is too short to be comprehensive, so it does not attempt to be. We have tried to emphasize particularly the molecular aspects of the subject, since one of the really exciting aspects of the field is the way in which explanations in terms of molecular structures are beginning to provide some understanding of channel function. We have written it primarily for students and graduate students doing courses in such subjects as pharmacology, physiology, medicine, cell biology, biophysics, neuroscience and molecular biology, but it may also be useful to those just starting research in the area or to those scientists who simply wish to find out what is happening in a field different from their own.

It is important for science students to know not only where we are now but also how we got here. This does not mean that they have to study the history of the subject for its own sake, but they do need to grasp the logic of the accepted views and be aware of some of the evidence behind them. So we have often given details of how particular experiments were done, and many of our illustrations show the results of experiments rather than simply giving their conclusions. It is partly for this reason that we have given literature references for many of our statements. The other reason is that we felt that in a rapidly moving field (60% of the papers in our reference list are from 1990 or



later) it was necessary to let the reader know where our information comes from.

Some biologists like equations, others find that their eyes flick rapidly downward when they meet one on the printed page. We have included a number of equations, but only where they are necessary for the argument. Much of science is concerned with quantitative testing of hypotheses, and in order to make quantitative predictions it is frequently necessary to use a mathematical approach. The precise symbolism of mathematics can also be a considerable aid to clear thinking. But the mathematics in this book, readers will find, is actually pretty easy.

We have benefited greatly from input from our colleagues in Leicester, Norwich and elsewhere, and so it is a pleasure to thank Bill Brammar, Alan Coddington, Peter Croghan, Noel Davies, Alan Dawson, Richard Keynes, Edward Lea, Philip Shelton, Michael Sutcliffe and John Thain for all the help and good advice they have given us in commenting on draft material and discussing particular points with us. It seems appropriate also to acknowledge our long-term indebtedness to Professor Sir Alan Hodgkin, who introduced us to the subject matter of this book and gave each of us considerable encouragement at crucial times. Like most who study channels, our understanding has been greatly helped by Bertil Hille's classic *Ionic Channels of Excitable Membranes*. We are grateful to the many authors and publishers who have given us permission to reproduce diagrams from their works, details of which are included in the reference list at the end of the book. Finally we thank Jessica and Pippa for their tolerance and good humoured support during the writing.

It has been a stimulating and rather enjoyable business writing a book on such a rapidly developing subject, and we have educated ourselves considerably in the process. We hope that our readers will find the result useful.

David Aidley  
Peter Stanfield