Published in final edited form as:

Clin Neurophysiol. 2011 April ; 122(4): 637–638. doi:10.1016/j.clinph.2010.09.023.

Cutaneous perception during tDCS: Role of electrode shape and sponge salinity

Preet Minhas, Abhishek Datta, and Marom Bikson*

The City College of New York of CUNY, Department of Biomedical Engineering, T-403B Steinman Hall, 160 Convent Avenue, New York, NY 10031, USA

Keywords

tDCS; perception; sponge salinity; electrode shape; current concentration

Transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) is a noninvasive method of brain modulation that is increasingly tested for the treatment of neuropsychiatric disorders (Murphy et al 2009) and cognitive enhancement (Paulus, 2004; Talelli and Rothwell, 2006). Conventional tDCS protocols apply 1–2 mA of current, for several minutes, through conductive-rubber electrodes inserted in sponge wrappers, which are typically soaked in saline, before being placed on the scalp. tDCS has many useful characteristics including low cost, ease of use, portability, and absence of significant side-effects. Indeed, during tDCS, mild tingling or itching sensation are the most common adverse effects (Poreisz et al., 2007), and though isolated cases of skin burns have been reported (Lagopoulos and Degabriele, 2008; Palm et al., 2008), relatively large scale experiences from several active centers, including at Gottingen, suggest that under proper protocols, significant adverse events are avoided (Dundas et al., 2007; Loo et al., 2010; Poreisz et al., 2007).

Acute sensation under electrodes during DC stimulation is well established (Leeming et al 1970, Mason and Mackay, 1976) and is highly dependent on both stimulation intensity and electrode design (Dundas et al., 2007; Forrester and Petrofsky, 2004); Martinsen et al., 2004; Minhas et al., 2010). Though generally increasing applied current increases all physiological responses, sensation does not simply correlate with either skin damage or brain modulation (Bikson et al., 2009) because of importance of electrode design and montage (for example increasing the proximity of electrodes decreases total brain but not skin current). None-the-less, sensation is clinically significant in itself for several reasons including tolerability (especially in vulnerable populations), confounding of experimental and clinical results, and blinding. The report in this edition by Ambrus and colleagues in Gottingen evaluated sensation differences for surface-area matched (35 cm²) rectangular and round electrodes. For anodal and cathodal tDCS, as well as tRNS, they found no substantial differences in detection threshold, detection rate, false-positive rate, or quality of sensation.

It is well established, including through computational modeling studies, that during electrical stimulation, current distribution at the electrode-tissue (skin) interface is not uniform, with high concentration of current density at the electrode edges (Miranda et al.,

*Corresponding author. Marom Bikson, Tel.: 212-650-6791; fax: 212-650-6727, bikson@ccny.cuny.edu.

Publisher's Disclaimer: This is a PDF file of an unedited manuscript that has been accepted for publication. As a service to our customers we are providing this early version of the manuscript. The manuscript will undergo copyediting, typesetting, and review of the resulting proof before it is published in its final citable form. Please note that during the production process errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

2006). The concentration of current density at an electrode edge is generally undesired for safety reasons (especially for implanted electrodes; (Merrill et al., 2005)) and may increase sensation during transcutaneous stimulation. Note that during transcranial electrical stimulation, subsequent current dispersion across deeper tissues results in no electrode-edge related current concentrations at the brain (Miranda et al., 2006, Datta et al., 2008, Datta et al., 2009a,b). Various strategies for normalizing current distribution at the electrode-tissue interface have been developed focusing on the materials and/or shape of the electrode (Krasteva and Papazov, 2002; Gilad et al., 2007; Minhas et al., 2010) - motivating the tDCS/tRNS electrode shape study by Ambrus et al (2010).

We modeled the current density at the electrode-skin interface under conditions approximating those tested by Ambrus et al. (2010). Consistent with previous results, for both rectangular and round electrodes, the current density was significantly higher at the electrode edges (Figure 1). For the same average current density (total current applied to equally sized electrodes), there was a moderately higher peak concentration of current for the rectangular electrodes than for the circular electrodes (Figure 1 a2, b3), but only at the rectangular electrode corners (Figure 1 a3, b3). Given the scale (peak) and nature (distribution) of these differences, it is not surprising that difference in sensation could not be resolved clinically by Ambrus and colleagues – especially when considering that, practically, the effect of sharp rectangular edges would be reduced by hair wetting. We further modeled changing the saline concentration in the electrode; as expected decreasing sponge salinity significantly decreased peak current density at the electrode corners (Figure 1 a4, b4), consistent with the clinical finding by Dundas et al. (2007) – peak current densities for the circular and rectangular electrode were relatively matched.

To allow direct comparisons across electrode shapes, our simplified (planar) model does not address: 1) realistic head shapes and anatomy (leading to asymmetric current distribution at electrode edges); 2) potential difference in skin properties (skin micro-architecture). Indeed, Ambrus and colleagues report significant differences in sensitivity of perception across stimulation sites.

The simplest explanation for sensation and discomfort during transcutaneous electrical stimulation is the excitation of peripheral nerves; electrochemical processes (Minhas 2010), but not heating, (Nitsche and Paulus, 2000; Datta et al., 2009) may contribute during tDCS. Regardless of the mechanism(s), hot spots of current density around the electrode edges, and perhaps around skin inhomogeneities (e.g. sweat glands), are considered to increase sensitivity, and thus approaches to increase uniformity of current density at the electrode-skin interface are rational.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that current technologies and protocols in transcranial stimulation, which have been largely incrementally and empirically derived, can likely be further optimized and refined. For example, electrolyte fluids and gels optimized specifically for tDCS have only recently been explored (Dundas et al., 2007; Minhas 2010). The ultimate goal of such design efforts would be electrodes that minimize (if not eliminate) all sensation and prevent skin irritation, even under non-optimal conditions, while maintaining the simplicity and cost-effectiveness of existing designs. The report in this issue by Ambrus and colleagues is a valuable step toward that goal.

References

- Ambrus G, Andrea A, Paulus W. Comparing cutaneous perception induced by electrical stimulation using rectangular and round shaped electrodes. *Clin Neurophysiol*. 2010
- Bikson M, Datta A, Elwassif M. Establishing safety limits for transcranial direct current stimulation. *Clin Neurophysiol* 2009;120:1033–4. [PubMed: 19394269]

- Datta A, Bansal V, Diaz J, Patel J, Reato D, Bikson M. Gyri-precise head model of transcranial DC stimulation: Improved spatial focality using a ring electrode versus conventional rectangular pad. *Brain Stimul* 2009a;2(4):201–7.
- Datta A, Elwassif M, Bikson M. Bio-heat transfer model of transcranial DC stimulation: comparison of conventional pad versus ring electrode. *Conf Proc IEEE Eng Med Biol Soc* 2009b:670–3.
- Datta A, Elwassif M, Battaglia F, Bikson M. Transcranial current stimulation focality using disc and ring electrode configurations: FEM analysis. *J Neural Eng* 2008;5:163–74. [PubMed: 18441418]
- Dundas JE, Thickbroom GW, Mastaglia FL. Perception of comfort during transcranial DC stimulation: effect of NaCl solution concentration applied to sponge electrodes. *Clin Neurophysiol* 2007;118:1166–70. [PubMed: 17329167]
- Forrester BJ, Petrofsky JS. Effect of Electrode Size, Shape and Placement During Electrical Stimulation. *J Appl Res* 2004;4(2):346–54.
- Gilad O, Horesh L, Holder DS. Design of electrodes and current limits for low frequency electrical impedance tomography of the brain. *Med Biol Eng Comput* 2007;45:621–33. [PubMed: 17597329]
- Krasteva VT, Papazov SP. Estimation of current density distribution under electrodes for external defibrillation. *Biomed Eng Online* 2002;16:1–7.
- Lagopoulos J, Degabriele R. Feeling the heat: the electrode–skin interface during DCS. *Acta Neuropsychiatry* 2008;20:98–100.
- Loo CK, Martin DM, Alonzo A, Gandevia Mitchell PB, Sachdev P. Avoiding skin burns with transcranial direct current stimulation: preliminary considerations. *International Journal of Neuropsychopharmacology*. 2010
- Martinsen OG, Grimnes S, Piltan H. Cutaneous perception of electrical direct current. *ITBM–RBM* 2004;25(4):240–3.
- Merrill DR, Bikson M, Jefferys JGR. Electrical stimulation of excitable tissue: design of efficacious and safe protocols. *J Neuro Method* 2005;141:171–98.
- Miranda PC, Lomarev M, Hallett M. Modeling the current distribution during transcranial direct current stimulation. *Clinical Neurophysiology* 2006;117:1623–1629. [PubMed: 16762592]
- Minhas P, Bansal V, Patel J, Ho J, Diaz J, Datta A, Bikson M. Electrodes for high-definition transcutaneous DC stimulation for applications in drug delivery and electrotherapy, including tDCS. *Journal of Neuroscience Methods* 2010;190:188–197. [PubMed: 20488204]
- Murphy DN, Boggio P, Fregni F. Transcranial direct current stimulation as a therapeutic tool for the treatment of major depression: insights from past and recent clinical studies. *Curr Opin Psychiatry* 2009 May;22(3):306–11. [PubMed: 19339889]
- Nitsche MA, Liebetanz D, Lang N, Antal A, Teruga F, Paulus W. Safety criteria for transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) in humans. *Clin Neurophysiol* 2003;114:2220–2. [PubMed: 14580622]
- Palm U, Keeser D, Schiller C, Fintescu Z, Reisinger E, Padberg F, et al. Skin lesions after treatment with transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS). *Brain Stimul* 2008;1:386–7. [PubMed: 20633396]
- Paulus W. Outlasting excitability shifts induced by direct current stimulation of the human brain. *Supplements to Clinical Neurophysiology* 2004;57:708–714. [PubMed: 16106673]
- Poreisz C, Boros K, Antal A, Paulus W. Safety aspects of transcranial direct current stimulation concerning healthy subjects and patients. *Brain Res Bull* 2007;72:208–14. [PubMed: 17452283]
- Talelli P, Rothwell J. Does brain stimulation after stroke have a future? *Current Opinion in Neurology* 2006;19:543–550. [PubMed: 17102691]

Figure 1.

Comparison of the skin current density profiles for area matched rectangular and circular pads a1,b1: Modeled finite element geometry. The head model comprised of 4 concentric blocks (skin, skull, CSF, brain). The electrode and sponge pad had 0.5 mm and 2.5 mm thickness respectively. 2 mA of total current was applied to 35 cm² pads (boundary current density 0.0057 A/m²). a2,b2: For saline soaked sponged (1.4 S/m), current density was concentrated at electrode edges, with higher values observed at the rectangular electrode corners. Both panels plotted to the peak current density for the rectangular electrode (0.041 A/m²) a3,b3: Re-plotting these panels to a maximum current density of 0.029 A/m², emphasize that outside of the rectangular electrode corners, the typical current density around the circular electrode is higher. a4,b4: Decreasing sponge salinity (0.05 S/m) resulted in significantly more uniform electrode current densities, and reduced peak current densities for both rectangular and circular pads to approximately the same values.