Bed-Rest Studies: Fluid and Electrolyte Responses

John E. Greenleaf

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ABSTRACT

Acute and chronic changes in hydrostatic and osmotic pressures have a major influence on body fluid-electrolyte composition and distribution in humans. Acute changes in body position (e.g., standing) result in a decrease in plasma volume (PV), and subsequent assumption of the horizontal position restores the depleted PV. Long-term confinement in the horizontal position for 2-3 weeks results in a chronic decrease in PV, increased interstitial fluid volume, and unchanged or slightly increased extracellular fluid volume. Concentrations of blood electrolytes, glucose, and nitrogenous constituents remain within normal limits of variability when maintenance levels of isometric or isotonic exercise are performed for 1 hr/day. Hematocrit and plasma osmolality can be elevated significantly throughout bed rest (BR). Significant diuresis occurs on the first day, and increases in urine Na and Ca continue throughout BR, although voluntary fluid intake is unchanged. Urine Na and K are elevated during the second week of BR in spite of stabilization of PV and extracellular volume. The initial diuresis probably arises from the extracellular fluid while subsequent urine loss above control levels must come from the intracellular fluid. Preservation of the extracellular volume takes precedence over maintenance of the intracellular fluid volume. These findings suggest the functioning of a natriuretic factor (hormone) to account for the continued increased loss of Na in the urine.

INTRODUCTION

Although a necessary part of proper medical treatment for many infirmities, enforced bed rest with the patient in the horizontal position has probably been used inappropriately for many others. Normal healthy people spend about one-third of their lifetime in bed (about 8 hr/day). Prolonged bed rest alters at least three major input stimuli: hydrostatic pressure is lowered within the body fluid compartments and cardiovascular system; compression force on the long bones of the skeletal system is essentially eliminated; and there is usually a reduction in the total daily energy expenditure because of the partial confinement to bed. Also, the changed surroundings may induce feelings of anxiety in the patient (20). The sum total of physiological and psychological responses of bed-rest patients has been well described in allegorical terms by Asher (1):

"Look at a patient lying long in bed; what a pathetic picture he makes! The blood clotting in his veins, the lime draining from his bones, the scybala stacking up in his colon, the flesh rotting from his seat, the urine leaking from his distended bladder, and the spirit evaporating from his soul!"

Within the first few days of bed rest the major responses involve contraction of body fluid and electrolyte content, an apparently abnormal carbohydrate (glucose) metabolism, and altered venous compliance (Table 1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. TIME-COURSE OF PHYSIOLOGICAL CHANGES DURING BED REST</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>0-3 days</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Urinary diuresis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urinary calcium loss</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decreased plasma, interstitial, and extracellular fluid volumes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decreased secretion of gastric juice</td>
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<td>Decreased calf blood flow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased venous compliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased neutrophil digestive function</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glucose intolerance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decreased +G, acceleration tolerance</td>
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**FLUID COMPARTMENT VOLUME RESPONSES**

Acute changes in body position induce abrupt changes in fluid compartment volumes. Assumption of the upright body position, for example on a tilt-table, results in an immediate shift of fluid — within seconds — from the tissues above the hydrostatic indifference point (HIP) and into the tissues (pooling) below the HIP (18). The HIP appears to be located just below the apex of the heart. Some translocated fluid comes from the plasma volume (PV) and some presumably from the interstitial volume (ISV) resulting from increases in hydrostatic pressure below the HIP. If the subjects remain motionless when tilted, the combined effects of reductions in PV (hypovolemia), central venous pressure and flow, and peripheral resistance will culminate in a significant fall in systemic blood pressure and subsequent fainting. At syncope, PV will have decreased by 13%-16%. An excellent, comprehensive discussion of cardiovascular and fluid-shift responses to tilting was presented by Hinghofer-Szalkay at this symposium in 1982 (14).

There are three periods during prolonged bed rest when significant fluid shifts occur: the first day, the end of the second week, and the end of the fourth week (7,10). When the body is placed in the horizontal position, there are essentially opposite responses to those that occur when the body is
placed in the vertical position. Within the first few minutes of bed rest, with
the head tilted downward by 5°, there is a shift of fluid from the extremities
to the chest. The subjects experience fullness and heaviness in the head,
central venous pressure increases from 5.7 to 7.9 cm H₂O, and leg volume
decreases from 7.5 to 6.9 (23). At the same time, PV is decreasing [from
2,895 ml to 2,770 ml (-4.3%) after 6 hr and to 2,742 ml (-5.3%) after 24 hr of
head-down bed rest] (23). There are no direct measurements of changes in PV
after 30 min of bed rest, but during head-out water immersion there is a defi­
nite increase in PV (measured with Evans blue dye) of 8.8% at 30 min, with a
progressive decline in PV thereafter (9). Unlike during water immersion where
there is graded external pressure on the skin, during bed rest there is uneven
pressure on only part of the skin that varies as the subjects change body posi­
tion. These variable-pressure conditions probably contribute to variable
responses of the fluid-electrolyte system. There is a diuresis during the
first day (5) and a concomitant loss of PV during the first one or two days of
bed rest. Plasma volume appears to reach an equilibrium level at about -10%
to -13% by the fourth day (possibly sooner) of horizontal bed rest (Fig. 1,
Refs. 6, 17). Test results show that isometric exercise (250 kcal/hr) or iso­
tonic exercise (780 kcal/hr) during 14 days of bed rest appeared to maintain PV
at the equilibrium level of about -13% (Fig. 1), whereas PV continued to
decrease during bed rest with no remedial exercise (see Figs. 1 and 2). Red
cell mass decreased linearly with time by 100 ml (-5.0%) after 14 days and by
300 to 550 ml after 1 month (17, 22). Subjects sustaining plasma and red cell
volume losses of these magnitudes would very likely be incapacitated if forced
to stand erect in a 1-G environment. After 2 weeks of horizontal bed rest,
slow-onset head-to-foot (+Gz) acceleration tolerance was reduced by 49% in
young women (11), and by 24%-35% in young men (8). About one-half of the loss
in acceleration tolerance after bed rest can be accounted for by the hypovolemia
during bed rest and the additional hypovolemia during acceleration. The limit
of hypovolemia at the point of maximal tolerance during various active (peak
exercise) and passive (bed rest and +Gz acceleration) stresses is between -14.9%
and -19.5% (Tables 2 and 3).

The other major component of the extracellular fluid volume (ECV) is
the ISV. Like PV, the ISV also decreases during the first few days of bed rest
(Fig. 1). Between the fourth and fourteenth days the ISV increases to above­
normal levels, apparently to compensate for the reduction in PV. Thus, the ECV
remains unchanged from pre-bed-rest levels (Fig. 1), or it may be increased by
2.3 (12%) (21). In this situation, maintenance of the total ECV appears to
take precedence over preservation of PV.

Diuretic fluid loss and the associated negative water balance con­
tributed to the reduction in total body water during bed rest (5, 24). Total
body water is reduced by about 600 ml by the second day of bed rest (15), a
volume equal to the reduction in PV. After 12-14 days (possibly sooner) total
body water decreases by about 1,500 ml (15) when the ECV is restored and PV
remains depressed. With the restored ECV and a constant depressed PV, the loss
of total body water must have come from the intracellular fluid compartment;
this response is probably due in part to atrophy of muscle cells. Immobiliza­
tion of the elbow results in a 41% decrease in strength and significant
decreases of 33% in the area of fast-twitch fibers and of 25% in the area of
slow-twitch fibers (19).

These results strongly suggest that the early loss of fluid via the
kidney is derived from the extracellular (plasma and interstitial) fluid com­
partment. Fluid for subsequent restoration of the ECV and for the continuing
decrease of the PV must then come from the intracellular fluid compartment,
exclusive of the decreasing red cell mass, because of the different rates of
change of the ECV and cell mass. There are insufficient data to determine when
or if the PV reaches equilibrium. Both isometric and isotonic exercise

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Fig. 1. Mean fluid compartment and red cell volumes from seven men during control and horizontal bed-rest periods. *P < 0.05 from control values. †P < 0.05 from day 4 values. From Ref. 6 with permission.
PV LOSS = BR DAYS/−0.011 + (−0.0013) (DAYS)
TABLE 3. CHANGE IN PLASMA VOLUME DURING STRESS: BED REST AND $+\vec{g}_z$ ACCELERATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Bed rest, $%\Delta$</th>
<th>Acceleration, $%\Delta$</th>
<th>$E$, $%\Delta$</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greenleaf et al. (12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3.2 g/min</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8$^d$ bed rest 1 (ITE)*</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
<td>-10.6</td>
<td>-17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8$^d$ bed rest 2 (ITE)</td>
<td>-6.5</td>
<td>-11.9</td>
<td>-18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Beaumont et al. (26)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.2 g/min</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7$^d$ bed rest 1 (NOE)*</td>
<td>-12.6</td>
<td>-6.3</td>
<td>-18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7$^d$ bed rest 2 (IME)*</td>
<td>-11.3</td>
<td>-6.3</td>
<td>-17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7$^d$ bed rest 3 (ITE)</td>
<td>-7.8</td>
<td>-7.1</td>
<td>-14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenleaf et al. (11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 g/min</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12$^d$ bed rest 1 (NOE)</td>
<td>-12.6</td>
<td>-4.1</td>
<td>-16.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NOE, no exercise; ITE, isotonic exercise; IME, isometric exercise.

performed during bed rest appear to attenuate the hypovolemia, but they have essentially no effect on restoration of the ISV (Fig. 1). Following 2 weeks of bed rest, maintenance of extracellular (interstitial) volume takes precedence over maintenance of plasma and intracellular volumes. This response is essentially independent of the effects of moderate remedial exercise. Therefore, the mechanism that stabilizes the ECV by increasing ISV appears to respond mainly to the decrease in hydrostatic pressure rather than to the reduction in exercise metabolism.

PLASMA ELECTROLYTE AND PROTEIN RESPONSES

The chronic reduction of PV during prolonged bed rest, with controlled dietary intake, is accompanied by moderate hemococoncentration during the first few days of rest as indicated by statistically significant increases in hematocrit, plasma osmolality (Fig. 3), and plasma glucose (Fig. 4) measured in basal blood samples. The relatively unchanged plasma Na concentration (Fig. 4) could not account for the increased plasma osmolality. Other plasma constituents including total protein, albumin, Cl, Na, uric acid, Ca, K, P, creatinine, and blood urea N— with only a few exceptions — were essentially unchanged during 14 days of bed rest (Figs. 3-5). The two exercise regimens had no consistent effect on basal concentrations of these variables within the first few days of rest. Notable exceptions occurred with plasma K and Ca after 2 weeks of bed rest. Their concentrations were increased significantly during the two exercise regimens (Fig. 5), suggesting that exercise facilitates retention of K and Ca content (PV x concentration) because PV was decreased. Compared with the no-exercise data, there were fewer statistically significant losses of plasma constituent contents with the two exercise regimens (6). In a few instances, a significant decrease of a plasma constituent content early during bed rest was returned to the control level by the end of rest. This restoration occurred for K with isometric exercise, and for K, Cl, and uric acid with isotonic exercise (6). Neither form of exercise eliminated the significant losses of albumin and glucose contents, but isotonic exercise had the greatest inhibitory effect on those losses. By the end of bed rest, plasma albumin content decreased by 29 g with no exercise, by 20 g with isometric exercise, but by only 10 g with isotonic exercise. The attenuating effect on albumin loss by isotonic exercise may be a manifestation of the same mechanism where isotonic exercise facilitates the induction of hypervolemia during exercise training in ambulatory subjects (3). Thus, there were few significant differences between the two exercise regimens in the fluid-electrolyte-protein responses, and both
Fig. 3. Mean plasma protein, albumin, osmolality, and hematocrit in seven men during control, horizontal bed-rest, and ambulatory recovery periods. *P < 0.05 from day minus 2 control value. From Ref. 6 with permission.
Fig. 4. Mean plasma constituent data from seven men during control, horizontal bed-rest, and ambulatory recovery periods. *P < 0.05 from day minus 2 control value. Data from Ref. 6.
Fig. 5. Mean plasma constituent data from seven men during control, horizontal bed-rest, and ambulatory recovery periods. *P < 0.05 from day minus 2 values. Data from Ref. 6.
regimens facilitated stabilization and attenuation of shifts in plasma constituent contents.

**URINE ELECTROLYTE AND NITROGEN RESPONSES**

Urine creatinine and urea N excretion were essentially unchanged from ambulatory control levels during rest (Fig. 6). Urine Ca excretion was significantly increased on the first day of rest for the two exercise regimens, and was significantly elevated in all three regimens by day 6 of rest (Fig. 6).

There was a marked, significant diuresis during the first 24 hr of bed rest with the no-exercise and isometric exercise regimens from a control level of 1.5 l/24 hr (1.0 ml/min) to 2.5 l/24 hr (1.7 ml/min) (Fig. 7). Performance of isotonic exercise resulted in a smaller but significant diuresis of 1.8 l/24 hr (1.2 ml/min). During the 14 days of bed rest the cumulative urine volumes were 26.9 l with no exercise, 26.6 l with isometric exercise, but only 22.2 l with isotonic exercise. This reduction in urine volume with isotonic exercise was not due to differences in diet, total fluid intake, voluntary fluid intake (Fig. 7), or to nonurine output such as diarrhea or vomiting. In fact, total fluid intake was decreasing during the first few days of rest. Sweating was negligible during isometric exercise, but was about 600-700 ml/hr during isotonic exercise at a load equivalent to 68% of the subjects' peak oxygen uptake. At this exercise intensity the PV would have been reduced by 10%, and plasma vasopressin and renin activity both would have been elevated about twofold above resting levels to 2.8 pg/ml and 4.9 ng Ang I/(ml x hr), respectively (4). These combined responses would tend to promote renal Na and water reabsorption to assist in restoration of the hypovolemia, with a resulting reduction in urine volume for perhaps 1-2 hr/day during the isotonic exercise and for some undefined period thereafter.

Urine Na, Cl, and osmotic losses increased significantly along with the 24-hr diuresis with the two exercise regimens and the no-exercise regimen (Fig. 7). But there were no excessive losses or retention of these ions and osmo1s during rest with isotonic exercise (Fig. 7). There were statistically significant increases in urine K (Fig. 6) and Na (Fig. 7) with all three regimens during rest, especially with isometric and no exercise, and significant reductions in output to below control levels during the ambulatory recovery periods. Chobanian et al. (2) have observed negative Na and K balances throughout 2-3 weeks of bed rest in conjunction with unchanged plasma renin activity and aldosterone secretory rates. On the other hand, Kiel and Ellis (16) reported that plasma renin activity increased by 91% above ambulatory control values on days 10-15 of bed rest, whereas plasma vasopressin decreased by 33% on days 2-17 of rest. A decrease in vasopressin could explain the continued moderate increase in urine volume during the second week of bed rest. The combined effects of a natriuretic hormone, which would inhibit the Na-retention effect of aldosterone, acting in concert with the K-dumping action of aldosterone, could explain these paradoxical urine ion losses after the first 24 hr of rest. The increased loss of Na within the first 48 hr of bed rest is the appropriate response to hypovolemia to maintain plasma Na concentration within normal homeostatic limits. The reason for the continued increased loss of Na in urine during the second week of rest is not clear in view of the fact that plasma volume with the exercise regimens had stabilized and the extracellular fluid volume had returned to control levels. Apparently, fluid-electrolyte homeostasis had not reached equilibrium by 14 days of bed rest.

It is fitting that we end with an Asher (1) aphorism: "Teach us to live that we may dread, unnecessary time in bed. Get people up and we may save, our patients from an early grave."
Fig. 6. Mean urine constituent losses from seven men during control, horizontal bed-rest, and ambulatory recovery periods. *P < 0.05, from day minus 1 control value. From Ref. 5 with permission.
Fig. 7. Mean body weight, fluid intake, and urine volume and electrolyte excretion during control, horizontal bed-rest, and ambulatory recovery periods. *P < 0.05 from day minus 1 control value. From Ref. 5 with permission.
REFERENCES


**BED-REST STUDIES: FLUID AND ELECTROLYTE RESPONSES**

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**Abstract**

Acute and chronic changes in hydrostatic and osmotic pressures have a major influence on body fluid-electrolyte composition and distribution in humans. Acute changes in body position (e.g., standing) result in a decrease in plasma volume (PV), and subsequent assumption of the horizontal position restores the depleted PV. Long-term confinement in the horizontal position for 2-3 weeks results in a chronic decrease in PV, increased interstitial fluid volume, and unchanged or slightly increased extracellular fluid volume. Concentrations of blood electrolytes, glucose, and nitrogenous constituents remain within normal limits of variability when maintenance levels of isometric or isotonic exercise are performed for 1 hr/day. Hematocrit and plasma osmolality can be elevated significantly throughout bed rest (BR). Significant diuresis occurs on the first day, and increases in urine Na and Ca continue throughout BR, although voluntary fluid intake is unchanged. Urine Na and K are elevated during the second week of BR in spite of stabilization of PV and extracellular volume. The initial diuresis probably arises from the extracellular fluid while subsequent urine loss above control levels must come from the intracellular fluid. Preservation of the extracellular volume takes precedence over maintenance of the intracellular fluid volume. These findings suggest the functioning of a natriuretic factor (hormone) to account for the continued increased loss of Na in the urine.

**Key Words**

Bed rest, Deconditioning, Diuresis, Urine electrolytes, Fluid compartments, Plasma volume

**Subject Category - 52**

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