Isotope Fractionation Studies in Prestellar Cores: The Case of Nitrogen

Stefanie N. Milam and Steven B. Charnley

NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, Astrochemistry Laboratory, Code 691.0
Greenbelt, MD 20771, USA (email: stefanie.n.milam@nasa.gov)

Isotopically fractionated material is found in many solar system objects, including meteorites and comets [1]. It is considered, in some cases, to trace interstellar material that was incorporated into the solar system without undergoing significant processing, thus preserving the fractionation. In interstellar molecular clouds, ion-molecule chemistry continually cycles nitrogen between the two main reservoirs - N and N2 - leading to only minor 15N enrichments [2]. Charnley and Rodgers [3,4] showed that depletion of CO removes oxygen from the gas and weakens this cycle such that significant 15N fractionation can occur for N2 and other N-bearing species in such cores. Observations are being conducted at millimeter and submillimeter wavelengths employing various facilities in order to both spatially and spectrally, resolve emission from these cores. A preliminary study to obtain the 14N/15N ratio in nitriles (HCN and HNC) was conducted at the Arizona Radio Observatory’s 12m telescope on Kitt Peak, AZ. Spectra were obtained at high resolution (0.08 km/s) in order to resolve dynamic properties of each source as well as to resolve hyperfine structure present in certain isotopologues. This study included four dark cloud cores, observed to have varying levels of molecular depletion: L1521E, L1498, L1544, and L1521F. Previous studies of the 14N/15N ratio towards L1544 were obtained with N2H+ and NH3, yielding ratios of 446 and >700, respectively [5,6]. The discrepancy observed in these two measurements suggests a strong chemical dependence on the fractionation of nitrogen. Ratios (C,N, and D) obtained from isotopologues for a particular molecule are likely tracing the same chemical heritage and are directly comparable within a given source. Results and comparisons between the protostellar evolutionary state and isomer isotope fractionation as well as between other N-bearing species will be presented.