



## FACT SHEET

# SAXITOXIN (mytilotoxin; shellfish toxins; STX, PSP)

## 1. Background

Saxitoxins are neurotoxic poisons produced naturally by certain types of planktonic algae (dinoflagellates). The consumption of shellfish (e.g. mussels, butter clams and oysters) that have accumulated the toxin when feeding on these organisms may cause paralytic shellfish poisoning in humans (mytilotoxism). It should be noted that the concentration of the toxin can be higher still - as much as 10 mg of saxitoxin per 100 g of mussel flesh – when algal blooms occur. Another source of PSP toxins are freshwater cyanobacteria (e.g. *Aphanizomenon flos-aquae*).

The first complete chemical analysis and synthesis of saxitoxin was conducted by Kishi in 1977. Given that it is extremely difficult to synthesise, saxitoxin (and its derivatives) cannot be readily procured.

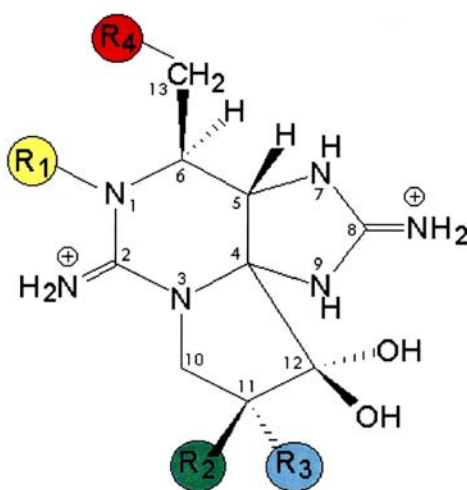
## 2. Saxitoxin as a bioweapon

Classified as Agent TZ (chemical weapon designation), saxitoxin is considered to have chemical weapon potential due to its high toxicity. Researchers have shown that it would be possible to spike ammunition with saxitoxin, thus ensuring the immediate death of the victim. Saxitoxin is much more poisonous than the synthetic nerve gas sarin and, like the phytotoxin ricin, is also classified as a biological weapon.

Saxitoxin is listed in the Chemical Weapons Convention (List 1). The toxin also appears in the Annex (War Weapons List) to the German War Weapons Control Act.

## 3. Chemical structure and properties

The best known PSP toxin is saxitoxin. Further 20 PSP toxins which have been isolated to date, show a high structural similarity to saxitoxin (Fig. 1).



Toxin	R1	R2	R3	R4	Molekulargewicht [g/mol]
STX	H	H	H		301
NEO	OH	H	H		317
GTX1	OH	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	H <sub>2</sub> N-COO	412
GTX2	H	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	(Carbamoyl-)	396
GTX3	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	H		396
GTX4	OH	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	H		412
B1	H	H	H		380
B2	OH	H	H		396
C3	OH	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	O <sub>3</sub> S-NH-COO	492
C1	H	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	(N-Sulfo-carbamoyl-)	476
C2	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	H		476
C4	OH	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	H		492
dcSTX	H	H	H		258
dcNEO	OH	H	H		274
dcGTX1	OH	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	OH	369
dcGTX2	H	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	(Decarbamoyl-)	353
dcGTX3	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	H		353
dcGTX4	OH	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	H		369
doSTX	H	H	H	H	242
doGTX2	H	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	(Deoxy-decarbamoyl-)	337
doGTX3	H	OSO <sub>3</sub> <sup>-</sup>	H		337

Fig. 1: Structure of saxitoxin and its derivatives

PSP toxins are soluble in water, methanol and ethanol, but not in other organic solvents. They remain stable in slightly acidic environments, but tend to oxidise when exposed to alkaline conditions.

#### 4. Toxicity

Saxitoxin (STX) is a powerful neurotoxin. Like tetrodotoxin, STX binds to the sodium channels in nerve cells, thereby blocking the influx of sodium ions (Fig. 2). A single STX molecule is enough to block one sodium channel. The two guanidine sub-structures present in saxitoxin must be protonated.

The toxicity of saxitoxin is much greater than that of synthetic neurotoxins. Consequently, it ranks alongside other proteins, such as ricin and botulinum toxin, as one of the most poisonous chemical substances known to mankind.

LD<sub>50</sub> (mouse): oral: 8-9 µg/kg, inhalation: 2 µg/kg

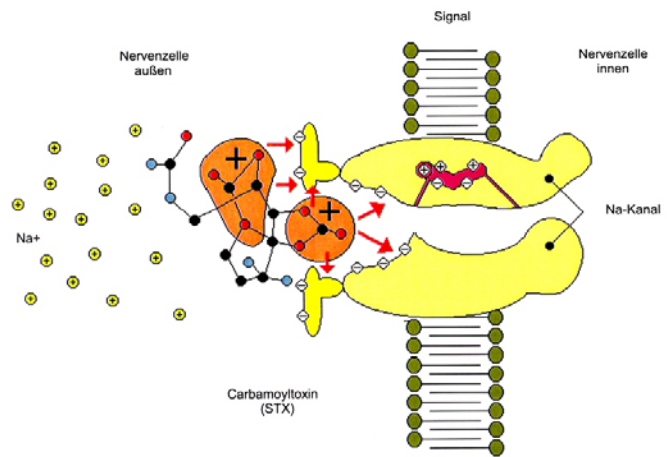


Fig. 2: Model of how PSP toxins bind to the surface of excitable nerve cell membranes

#### 5. Analysis

A variety of biological, biochemical and chemical procedures can be used to analyse saxitoxin. These can be divided into two groups: non-chromatographic and chromatographic. The first group includes bioassays, immunoassays and fluorimetric assays. However, these are only capable of producing a summary identification of several PSP toxins (total toxicity).

However, over the last 15 years, highly sensitive chromatographic procedures have been developed which make it possible to identify individual compounds with greater precision. Over time, the HPLC method, which uses fluorescence detection, has become the standard procedure.

The SPIEZ LABORATORY uses the following procedures to analyse saxitoxin:

- HPLC method using fluorescence detection (using pre-column derivatisation with peroxide according to DIN EN 14526)
- LC/MS
- ELISA (RIDASCREEN FAST Saxitoxin; r-biopharm)
- Immunochromatography (JELLETT; Rapid Test for PSP)

Other common analytical procedures include capillary electrophoresis and mouse bioassay. However, these are not used by the SPIEZ LABORATORY

#### 5. Literature/Information

- E. Jaime; Analytik und Vorkommen von Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (PSP)-Toxinen in marinen Organismen; PhD thesis; Friedrich Schiller University Jena, 2003.
- Prof. Dr. P. Schreier; Algen als Nahrungsmittel; Bayerische Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg; paper by Hedwig Reder, 2003.
- WHO guidance: <http://www.who.int/csr/delibepidemics/annex2.pdf>
- H. Rusmann; Toxine: Biogene Gifte und potenzielle Kampfstoffe; Springer-Verlag Heidelberg; Vol. 46, No. 11; p. 989-996; 2003.
- DIN EN 14526: Foodstuffs - Determination of saxitoxin and dc-saxitoxin in mussels - HPLC method using pre-column derivatization with peroxide or periodate oxidation; German version, 2004.
- Leigh Lehane; Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning - a review; National Office of Animal and Plant Health Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; Australia, Canberra, 2000.