

Clinical Workshop

S. G. HERSHEY, M.D., *Editor*

Color as an Index of Gastric-content Acidity

TAMAS KALLOS, M.D.

Mendelson's syndrome¹ develops after inhalation of gastric secretions of pH 2.4 or less.² The presence of bile in the stomach is indicative of reflux of duodenal content (pH approximately 8) into the stomach. When vomiting or regurgitation of bile-colored material occurs, can it be assumed that neutralization of gastric content has occurred, elevating its pH above the dangerous level? This study was designed to test this assumption.

Samples of vomitus were obtained after spontaneous emesis from 50 elective surgical patients during emergence from anesthesia maintained with a number of different anesthetics. The material was collected in a clean emesis basin, its pH was determined with Hydriion pH paper to within 0.5 pH units, and its color noted. It was then transferred into glass pipettes, sealed with Critoseal and stored for color comparison.

Nine of the 50 samples had a distinct bile-tinged (golden brown) color; 41 were colorless. While the pH values of the colorless samples ranged from 1.5 to 7.0, all of the bile-tinged specimens had pH values of 5.0 or more (table 1).

The findings confirm earlier reports³ that pH values of gastric contents in elective sur-

gical patients may range from 1.5 to 8. In our series 32 per cent of the patients had gastric contents with pH values of 2.5 or less.

While bile coloration of gastric content gives good assurance that its pH is above the danger level of 2.5, the pH of colorless gastric content is unpredictable. In cases of suspected aspiration of colorless liquid material the determination of its pH is important, because immediate treatment and close observation are indicated when the pH is below 2.5.

The measurement may be done rapidly and inexpensively on a small sample from the mouth, face mask, suction tip, or pillow with the aid of pH paper (*e.g.*, Hydriion pH paper, range 1 to 5.5). It is suggested that every anesthetist have pH paper available for such tests.

REFERENCES

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2. Teabeaut JR: Aspiration of gastric contents: Experimental study. *Amer J Path* 28:51, 1952
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TABLE 1. Correlation between Color and pH of Gastric Content in Elective Surgical Patients

	"Dangerous" pH			"Safe" pH											
	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	7.5	8.0	
Colorless	4	5	7	4	5	6	0	2	3	0	2	3	0	0	
Bile-colored	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	4	0	1	

Received from the Department of Anesthesia, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Supported in part by

USPHS Grant 5-P01-GM-15430-04 from the National Institutes of General Medical Sciences, National Institutes of Health.