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Sorption: Principles Mechanisms and Environmental Significance

Meera N Singh*

Department of Environmental Science, Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

***Corresponding author:** Meera N Singh, Department of Environmental Science, Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India, Email meera.singh@iitk.ac.in

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Abstract

Sorption describes the collective processes by which substances attach to surfaces, including adsorption (surface attachment) and absorption (bulk uptake). It plays a central role in controlling the fate and transport of chemicals in soil, sediments, water, and engineered systems. Sorption processes influence pollutant mobility, nutrient availability, water purification, and contaminant remediation. This article reviews sorption mechanisms, factors affecting sorption, and its environmental significance, with examples from natural and engineered systems. Understanding sorption is essential for predicting contaminant behavior and designing effective mitigation strategies.

Keywords: Sorption, Adsorption, Absorption, Partitioning, Soil Chemistry, Contaminant Fate, Environmental Remediation, Isotherms

Introduction

Sorption is a broad term used in environmental science and chemistry to describe the uptake of substances from one phase to another, such as contaminants attaching to soil particles or organic molecules binding to activated carbon. Sorption encompasses **adsorption** — the attachment of molecules onto a surface — and **absorption** — penetration into the bulk of a material. Together, these processes control how chemicals are retained, mobilized, or transformed in environmental compartments.

In natural systems, sorption influences the transport and bioavailability of nutrients, metals, pesticides, and organic pollutants. In engineered systems, sorption underpins technologies such as water filtration and soil remediation. The extent and mechanisms of sorption are governed by physical and chemical factors including surface area, pH, organic matter, ionic strength, and the properties of the sorbate (the substance being sorbed). Characterizing sorption behavior is thus fundamental to soil and water chemistry, contaminant hydrology, and environmental engineering [1].

Sorption Mechanisms and Influencing Factors

Sorption processes can occur through multiple mechanisms depending on the sorbent (substrate) and sorbate (substance being sorbed):

This mechanism involves weak, non-specific interactions such as van der Waals forces. Physisorption is typically reversible and depends on surface area and temperature. High surface area materials like activated carbon exhibit significant physisorption capacity for organic contaminants. Chemisorption involves the formation of chemical bonds between the sorbate and the sorbent surface. These interactions are stronger than physisorption and often irreversible under normal environmental conditions. Heavy metal ions, for example, form inner-sphere complexes with soil organic matter or mineral surfaces through chemisorption [2].

In systems where organic matter or hydrophobic phases are present, organic contaminants may partition into organic phases rather than just attach to surfaces. For example, hydrophobic organic compounds partition into soil organic matter based on their hydrophobicity (often characterized by the octanol-water partition coefficient, $K_{o}w$). Ion exchange involves the reversible replacement of ions on sorbent surfaces with ions in solution. Clay minerals and organic matter commonly exhibit ion exchange capacity, which controls the mobility of cations like ammonium (NH_4^+), potassium (K^+), and heavy metals. Surface area, pore size distribution, and functional groups on surfaces (e.g., hydroxyl, carboxyl groups) strongly affect sorption capacity. High surface area sorbents like biochar and activated carbon exhibit enhanced adsorption of organic contaminants [3].

Molecular size, polarity, solubility, and chemical structure influence how substances interact with surfaces. Hydrophobic and non-polar organic molecules often exhibit stronger sorption to organic matter, while charged species interact via electrostatic or ion exchange mechanisms. pH influences the speciation of both sorbates and sorbent surface charge, affecting sorption capacity. For example, heavy metal sorption often increases at higher pH due to reduced competition with protons and increased negative surface charge. Ionic strength and competing ions also modify sorption behavior by altering electrostatic interactions. In soils and sediments, sorption controls the mobility of pollutants. Strong sorption retards transport, reducing leaching into groundwater but potentially increasing residence times in soils. Weak sorption allows contaminants to move more freely, increasing the risk of water pollution. Sorption is therefore a key parameter in contaminant transport models and risk assessments [4].

Sorption affects nutrient dynamics in soils: essential nutrients such as ammonium and phosphate bind to soil particles and organic matter. The balance between sorption and desorption determines nutrient availability for plant uptake. Soil management practices (e.g., organic amendments) can modify sorption properties, enhancing fertility and crop productivity. Engineered sorbents such as activated carbon, zeolites, and biochars are widely used in water treatment to remove organic pollutants, heavy metals, and emerging contaminants. Sorption is fundamental to remediation technologies including permeable reactive barriers and soil amendments designed to immobilize toxic substances. Moreover, sorption data are used to design adsorption isotherms (e.g., Freundlich, Langmuir models) that describe the relationship between sorbate concentration and sorption capacity critical for engineering applications [5].

Conclusion

Sorption is a central chemical and physical process that governs the interaction of chemicals with environmental surfaces. Whether through adsorption, absorption, partitioning, or ion exchange, sorption influences pollutant mobility, nutrient cycling, and the performance of remediation systems. Understanding sorption mechanisms and the factors that control them including surface properties, sorbate characteristics, and environmental conditions is essential for predicting contaminant fate, managing soil and water quality, and optimizing engineered sorbent systems for environmental protection. Continued research integrating laboratory, field, and modeling approaches will improve our ability to manage environmental challenges arising from chemical pollution and ecosystem degradation.

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