List Of Common Buffer Solutions

UNDERSTANDING BUFFER SOLUTIONS AND THEIR ESSENTIAL ROLE

Buffer solutions are fundamental in chemistry, biology, and countless industrial processes. A buffer is an aqueous solution that resists changes in pH when small amounts of an acid or a base are added, or when the solution is diluted. This remarkable property comes from the presence of a weak acid and its conjugate base, or a weak base and its conjugate acid, in equilibrium. Without buffers, many critical reactions in living organisms, laboratory experiments, and manufacturing would be impossible to control. From maintaining the pH of human blood (around 7.4) to calibrating pH meters and stabilizing pharmaceuticals, buffers are everywhere. Understanding the **list of common buffer solutions** and their specific characteristics allows scientists, students, and

professionals to select the right system for any given application.

Each buffer solution operates effectively within a certain pH range, typically within ±1 pH unit of the weak acid's pKa. The choice of buffer depends on the required pH, the chemical compatibility with the system, and the buffer capacity needed. Below, we explore the most widely used buffer solutions, categorized by their primary application areas.

COMMON BIOLOGICAL BUFFER SOLUTIONS

Biological systems are extremely sensitive to pH changes. Consequently, a number of specialized buffers have been developed to maintain physiological pH ranges without interfering with biochemical reactions.

Phosphate Buffer (Monobasic/Dibasic Sodium Phosphate)

Components: Monobasic sodium phosphate (NaH_2PO_4) and dibasic sodium phosphate (Na_2HPO_4).
Effective pH Range: 5.8 – 8.0 (commonly used for 6.8 – 7.4).
Applications: Phosphate buffer is one

of the most versatile and frequently used buffers in biochemical research. It is often employed in protein purification, enzyme assays, and cell culture media. Its pKa values (2.12, 7.21, 12.67) make the second dissociation (pKa_2 = 7.21) ideal for near-neutral pH. However, phosphates can precipitate with divalent cations like calcium and magnesium, which limits their use in some cellular studies.

Tris Buffer (Tris(hydroxymethyl)aminomethane)

Components: Tris base and hydrochloric acid (HCl) or Tris acetate/EDTA.

Effective pH Range: 7.0 – 9.0 (pKa = 8.07 at 25°C).

Applications: Tris is a cornerstone in molecular biology. It is the key component in Tris-EDTA (TE) buffer (used for DNA storage), TAE and TBE buffers (for agarose gel electrophoresis), and many protein purification buffers. The pH of Tris is highly temperature-dependent; a solution at pH 8.0 at 25°C drops to about pH 7.8 at 4°C and rises to pH 8.2 at 37°C. Therefore, Tris is less suitable for experiments requiring

precise pH control over varying temperatures.

HEPES Buffer (4-(2-hydroxyethyl)-1-piperazineethanesulfonic acid)

Components: HEPES (zwitterionic) with sodium hydroxide (NaOH) or potassium hydroxide (KOH).
Effective pH Range: 6.8 – 8.2 (pKa = 7.48 at 25°C).

Applications: HEPES is a "Good's buffer" developed for biological applications where non-toxicity and minimal metal ion binding are critical. It is widely used in cell culture media (e.g., RPMI-1640, DMEM), especially when CO_2-controlled incubators are not available. HEPES does not complex with calcium or magnesium as phosphate does, making it superior for many live-cell experiments. It also exhibits low temperature coefficient, maintaining a more stable pH across temperature variations.

MOPS

Buffer (3-(N-morpholino)propanesulfonic acid)

Components: MOPS free acid and NaOH or KOH.
Effective pH Range: 6.5 – 7.9 (pKa = 7.2 at 25°C).
Applications: MOPS is another Good's buffer frequently used in electrophoresis (especially for RNA in formaldehyde gels) and as a running buffer for protein gels. It provides excellent pH stability and does not interfere with most enzymatic reactions. MOPS is also used in bacterial growth media and plant tissue culture.

PIPES Buffer (Piperazine-N,N′-bis(2-ethanesulfonic acid))

Components: PIPES disodium salt or free acid adjusted with NaOH.
Effective pH Range: 6.1 – 7.5 (pKa = 6.76 at 25°C).
Applications: PIPES is valued for its low metal

ion binding and minimal biological activity. It is often used in cell fixation and in studies of microtubules and actin filaments. Its pKa is close to physiological pH, and it does not absorb ultraviolet light in the 240–280 nm range, making it compatible with spectrophotometry.

COMMON CHEMICAL LABORATORY BUFFERS

In general chemistry and analytical laboratories, a different set of buffer solutions is standard. These buffers are often simple to prepare and cover a broad pH spectrum.

Acetate Buffer (Acetic Acid/Sodium Acetate)

Components: Acetic acid (CH_3COOH) and sodium acetate (CH_3COONa).

Effective pH Range: 3.7 – 5.6 (pKa = 4.76 at 25°C).

Applications: Acetate buffer is a classic system for acidic pH ranges. It is commonly used in DNA extraction, chromatographic separations (ion-exchange), and as a medium for some enzymatic reactions that function best at

slightly acidic pH. Acetate is also employed as a buffer in certain electroplating baths and in the food industry for pH control.

Citrate Buffer (Citric Acid/Sodium Citrate)

Components: Citric acid ($C_6H_8O_7$) and trisodium citrate or disodium citrate.

Effective pH Range: 3.0 – 6.2 (pKa values: 3.13, 4.76, 6.40).

Applications: Citrate buffer is a polyprotic system offering strong buffering capacity in the acidic region. It is widely used in serological tests (e.g., anticoagulant for blood collection), in histological tissue fixation, and in many biochemical assays (such as ELISA washing buffers). Citrate is also common in the food industry as a preservative and acidulant.

Carbonate-Bicarbonate Buffer (Sodium Carbonat

e/Sodium Bicarbonate)

Components: Sodium carbonate (Na_2CO_3) and sodium bicarbonate ($NaHCO_3$).

Effective pH Range: 9.2 – 10.6 (pKa_1 = 6.35, pKa_2 = 10.33).

Applications: This buffer is essential for enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays (ELISA) as a coating buffer, where a slightly alkaline pH helps proteins adsorb to plastic plates. It is also used in some industrial cleaning solutions and in water treatment. Carbonate buffers are sensitive to atmospheric CO_2, which can lower the pH over time.

Borate Buffer (Boric Acid/Sodium Borate)

Components: Boric acid (H_3BO_3) and sodium borate ($Na_2B_4O_7 \cdot 10H_2O$).

Effective pH Range: 8.0 – 10.0 (pKa = 9.24 at 25°C).

Applications: Borate buffers are frequently used in electrophoresis of nucleic acids (TBE buffer contains borate) and in the preparation of some buffer for ion-exchange chromatography. Borate also complexes with polyols, which can

interfere with certain biological assays, but it is useful for UV spectrophotometry because it does not absorb in the 200–400 nm range.

Phthalate Buffer (Potassium Hydrogen Phthalate /HCl or NaOH)

Components: Potassium hydrogen phthalate (KHP, $C_8H_5KO_4$) as a primary standard, adjusted with HCl or NaOH.

Effective pH Range: 2.2 – 3.8 (low pH) and 4.2 – 5.6 (high pH) based on two acid-base equilibria ($pKa_1 = 2.95$, $pKa_2 = 5.41$).

Applications: Phthalate buffers are primarily used for pH meter calibration in the acidic range. They are also used in some analytical methods for the determination of specific ions. However, due to environmental concerns about phthalates, their use has declined in some regions.

INDUSTRIAL AND COMMERCIAL BUFFER SOLUTIONS

Many industries rely on specific buffer formulations to ensure product stability or process reproducibility.

Standard pH Buffer Solutions for Calibration

Commercial buffer solutions are certified for pH meter calibration. The most common ones are:

- **pH 4.00 (Potassium phthalate).**
- **pH 6.86 (Mixed phosphate).**
- **pH 7.00 (Potassium phosphate monobasic/dibasic).**
- **pH 9.18 (Borate).**
- **pH 10.01 (Carbonate-bicarbonate).**

These buffers are traceable to national standards and are available as premixed powders, tablets, or ready-to-use liquids.

Electrophoresis Running Buffers

In addition to TAE and TBE (which contain Tris, acetate/borate, and EDTA), other common running buffers include **MOPS** (for RNA), **MES** (for small DNA fragments in agarose gels), and **CAPS** (for protein transfer in Western blotting, pH 9–11).

Each is designed to maintain a stable pH during electrophoresis and to provide the necessary ionic strength.

Pharmaceutical and Bioprocessing Buffers

In drug formulation, buffers such as **histidine**, **arginine**, and **succinate** are commonly used because they are biocompatible and often more stabilizing for proteins than traditional inorganic buffers. **Citrate** is also popular in liquid vaccines and antibody formulations. The **list of common buffer solutions** in the pharmaceutical industry continues to expand as biotherapeutics demand highly specific conditions for long-term stability.

HOW TO CHOOSE A BUFFER FROM THE LIST

Selecting the appropriate buffer depends on several key factors:

1. **Desired pH and pKa proximity:** Choose a buffer whose pKa is within 0.5–1 unit of the target pH for maximal buffering capacity.
2. **Temperature sensitivity:** Some buffers (e.g., Tris, phosphate) have

larger ΔpKa/°C values; for temperature-fluctuating experiments, zwitterionic buffers like HEPES or MOPS are better.

3. **Ionic strength and compatibility:** Avoid buffers that precipitate with metal ions (e.g., phosphate with Ca^{2+}) or interfere with downstream analyses (e.g., borate binding to sugars).
4. **Biological inertness:** For cell-based work, use Good's buffers (HEPES, MOPS, PIPES) that are non-toxic and don't complex with nutrients.
5. **UV absorbance:** Many biochemical assays measure absorbance at 280 nm or 260 nm; buffers containing aromatic rings (like phthalate) can interfere.

PREPARING A BUFFER SOLUTION FROM THE LIST

Once you have selected a suitable buffer system from the list, preparation follows a general procedure