**Chemical Communication**

The geometries of molecules play important roles in chemical reactivity. Molecular geometry is particularly important in a group of substances known as pheromones. *Pheromones* are chemicals used for communication between members of the same species. Pheromone activity has been observed in many forms of life, from insects to humans, and pheromone research is being done at many scholarly institutions.

If you’ve ever observed lines of ants moving in opposite directions, you have observed the influence of pheromones on insect behavior. When an ant finds food, it immediately heads toward its nest while secreting 9-oxy-2-decenoic acid from an abdominal gland. When other ants cross this acid trail, they compulsively follow it to the food source and carry the nourishment back to their nest. Soon, many ants will be following the acid trail and reinforcing it with their own 9-oxy-2-decenoic acid secretions. Eventually, the food source becomes exhausted, trail reinforcement stops, and the acid trail evaporates. Ants are so dependent on the acid trail that if a part of it were wiped away the ants following the trail in both directions would come to a complete stop. They wouldn’t know where to go.

Perhaps an even more impressive example than the total dependence on chemical communication by ants is demonstrated with the so-called “death pheromone.” Immediately upon the death of an ant, fellow ants continue to groom the dead ant and treat it as if it were still living. This attention continues until the dead ant’s body produces the death pheromone, 10-octadecenoic acid. On sensing this pheromone, colleagues carry the dead ant to the nearest garbage site. Interestingly, if 10-octadecenoic acid is applied to a living ant, the living ant is similarly dumped into the garbage. The discarded ant will quickly return only to be carried off again, and this process continues until the death pheromone evaporates.

Because pheromones are used by female insects to indicate their state of fertile readiness, pheromones have proven to be an effective weapon in controlling some crop-damaging insects. For example, when a specific mating pheromone is applied to crops, male cotton bollworms and female tobacco budworms compulsively mate with one another. Because of physical incompatibilities, their bodies become interlocked and both insects eventually die. Less drastic uses of pheromones to control crop damage involve baiting traps with sex pheromones to lure and trap male insects. Trapping males eventually slows reproduction, and the insect population may decrease to controllable levels. Some of these sex pheromones are so powerful that a single drop has the potential of attracting millions of males. In fact, some male insects can detect a single molecule of female pheromone from a great distance and then successfully seek out and find the female.

Chemical communication is not confined to the insect world. Female dogs secrete the chemical *p*-hydroxybenzoate to attract males. Just like the ants and cotton bollworms, who are dependent on detecting chemicals for their actions, male dogs will attempt to mate with various objects to which *p*-hydroxybenzoate has been applied.

When we examine the molecular structures and functional groups of known pheromones, we find that they have little in common. Some pheromones contain stereoisomers, and some insects can distinguish between the stereoisomers. The structures of pheromones play vital roles in their activity. Part of the structure is an upper limit of about 20 carbon atoms. Most pheromones must diffuse through the air; those with low molecular weights are often more volatile. Scientists suspect that the physical motions of pheromone molecules, which are also a function of molecular structure, play an important role in the communication mechanism.