

Gas-Phase Sugar Formation Using Hydroxymethylene as the Reactive Formaldehyde Isomer



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Introduction

Carbohydrates “(CH₂O)_n” or sugars are the formal adducts of carbon (atoms) to water with a repeating unit that structurally resembles “H-C-OH” (hydroxymethylene, **3a**). Although hydroxymethylene has been suggested as a viable building block for sugar formation, it is a reactive species that had escaped its detection until recently.[1]

Results

Here we demonstrate that formaldehyde (**2a**) reacts with its constitutional isomer hydroxymethylene to give glycolaldehyde (**1a**) in a nearly barrierless reaction.[2] This carbonyl-ene-type transformation operates in the absence of base and solvent at cryogenic temperatures similar to those found in extraterrestrial environments or interstellar molecular clouds.

Hydroxymethylene acts as a building block for an iterative sugar synthesis as we demonstrate through the formation of the triose glyceraldehyde (**5a**). The results, therefore, provide a link between the well-known formose (Butlerow) reaction and sugar formation under non-aqueous conditions.[3-4] High-level *ab initio* coupled cluster computations confirm our proposed nearly barrierless carbonyl-ene-type reaction.

Reference

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[2] Eckhardt, A. K., Linden, M. M., Wende, R. C., Bernhardt, B., & Schreiner, P. R. (2018): Gas-phase sugar formation using hydroxymethylene as the reactive formaldehyde isomer. *Nature chemistry*, 10(11), 1141. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41557-018-0128-2>

[3] Butlerow, A. (1861): Bildung einer zuckerartigen Substanz durch Synthese. *Justus Liebigs Annalen der Chemie*, 120(3), 295-298. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jlac.18611200308>

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