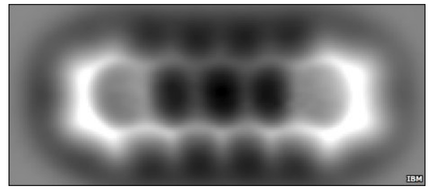
Historical First Image of a Single Molecule with Atomic Force Microscope

by J. C. Spencer



A new door in scientific research has just opened. The future for imaging molecules and better understanding of their bonds is now possible. This new method even shows the chemical bonds. This has never been accomplished before although shapes of single carbon nanotubes have been outlined. The atomic force microscope (AFM) will enable us to better understanding structure. Couple the AFM with the ability to measure the charge on an atom and we have the potential to predict new dimensions of structure function. Oh, what we can do with this technology in opening a new understanding of glycomics.

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Single molecule's stunning image

By Jason Palmer
Science and technology reporter, BBC News

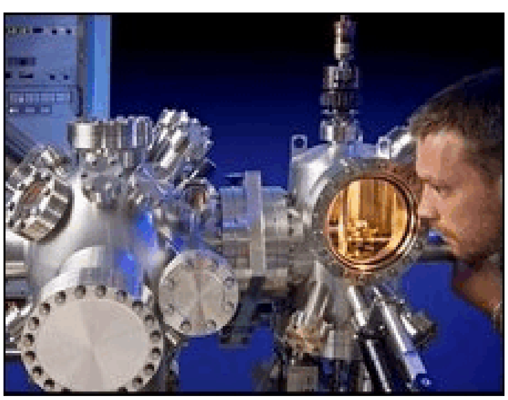
Even the bonds to the hydrogen atoms at the pentacene's periphery can be seen.

The detailed chemical structure of a single molecule has been imaged for the first time, say researchers.

The physical shape of single carbon nanotubes has been outlined before, using similar techniques - but the new method even shows up chemical bonds.

Understanding structure on this scale could help in the design of many things on the molecular scale, particularly electronics or even drugs.

The IBM researchers report their findings in the journal ***Science***.



The microscope must be kept under high vacuum and exceptionally cold.

It is the same group that in July reported the feat of measuring the charge on a single atom.

Fine tuning

In both cases, a team from IBM Research Zurich used what is known as an atomic force microscope or AFM.

Their version of the device acts like a tiny tuning fork, with one of the prongs of the fork passing incredibly close to the sample and the other farther away.

When the fork is set vibrating, the prong nearest the sample will experience a minuscule shift in the frequency of its vibration, simply because it is getting close to the molecule.

Comparing the frequencies of the two prongs gives a measure of just how close the nearer prong is, effectively mapping out the molecule's structure.

The measurement requires extremes of precision. In order to avoid the effects of stray gas molecules bounding around, or the general atomic-scale jiggling that room-temperature objects experience, the whole setup has to be kept under high vacuum and at blisteringly cold temperatures.

However, the tip of the AFM's prong is not well-defined and isn't necessarily sharp on the scale of single atoms. The effect of this bluntness is to blur the instrument's images.

The researchers have now hit on the idea of deliberately picking up just one small molecule - made of one atom of carbon and one of oxygen - with the AFM tip, forming the sharpest, most well-defined tip possible.

Their measurement of a pentacene molecule using this carbon monoxide tip shows the bonds between the carbon atoms in five linked rings, and even suggests the bonds to the hydrogen atoms at the molecule's periphery.

Tip of the iceberg

Lead author of the research Leo Gross told BBC News that the group is aiming to combine their ability to measure individual charges with the new technique, characterising molecules at a truly unprecedented level of detail.

That will help in particular in the field of "molecular electronics", a potential future for electronics in which individual molecules serve as switches and transistors.

Although the approach can trace out the ethereal bonds that connect atoms, it cannot distinguish between atoms of different types.

The team aims to use the new technique in tandem with a similar one known as scanning tunnelling microscopy - in which a tiny voltage is applied across the sample - to determine if the two methods in combination can deduce the nature of each atom in the AFM images.

That would help the entire field of chemistry, in particular the synthetic chemistry used for drug design.

The results are of wide interest to others who study the nano-world with similar instruments. For them, implementing the same approach is as simple as picking up one of these carbon monoxide molecules with their AFM before taking a measurement.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/8225491.stm

www.endowmentmed.org