

# Evaluation of a Sonic Device Designed to Activate Irrigant in the Root Canal

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The aims of this study were to evaluate the removal of dentin debris from the root canal by sonic or ultrasonic activation of the irrigant and the physical mechanisms of sonic activation by visualizing the oscillations of the sonic tip, both inside and outside the confinement of the root canal. **Methods:** Roots of 18 canines were embedded, split, and prepared into standardized root canals. A standard groove was cut on the wall of one half of each root canal and filled with the same amount of dentin debris before irrigation procedures. The removal of dentin debris was evaluated after different irrigation procedures. The oscillations of the sonic tip were visualized *ex vivo* by using high-speed imaging at a time scale relevant to the irrigation process, and the oscillation amplitude of the tip was determined under 20× magnification. **Results:** After irrigation, there was a statistically significant difference between the experimental groups ( $P < .0001$ ). Without irrigant activation, the grooves were still full of dentin debris. From the ultrasonic activated group, 89% of the canals were completely free of dentin debris, whereas from the sonic group, 5.5%–6.7% were ( $P = .0001$ ). There was no significant difference between the sonic activation groups. **Conclusions:** Activation of the irrigant resulted in significantly more dentin debris removal; ultrasonic activation was significantly more efficient than sonic activation. The oscillation amplitude of the sonically driven tips is  $1.2 \pm 0.1$  mm, resulting in much wall contact and no cavitation of the irrigant. (*J Endod* 2009; ■:1–4)

## Key Words

Activation, irrigation, root canal, sonic, ultrasonic

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Irrigation of the root canal space is a fundamental aspect of root canal treatment. Techniques for acoustic and hydrodynamic activation of the irrigant have been developed (1–3), because syringe irrigation is not effective in the apical part of the root canal (4, 5).

It has been shown that acoustic streaming and cavitation contribute to the cleaning efficiency of root canal irrigation (2, 3, 6). Acoustic streaming can be defined as a rapid movement of fluid in a circular or vortex-like motion around a vibrating file (7). Cavitation can be defined as the creation of vapor bubbles or the expansion, contraction, and/or distortion of preexisting bubbles (so-called cavitation nuclei) in a liquid; the process is coupled to acoustic energy (8). Studies have shown that passive sonic activation of irrigant is inferior to its counterpart in ultrasonic (9, 10). However, the details concerning those mechanisms have not been clarified.

The EndoActivator system (Advanced Endodontics, Santa Barbara, CA), a sonic device, has recently been developed for root canal irrigation. Special polymer tips can be driven sonically at 3 different frequencies to activate the irrigant. No data are currently available to support its use.

The aims of this study were (1) to determine the removal of dentin debris from the root canal by sonic or ultrasonic activation of the irrigant and (2) to evaluate the physical mechanisms of sonic activation by visualizing the oscillation amplitude of EndoActivator tips.

## Materials and Methods

### High-speed Imaging Experiments

An optical set-up was constructed to visualize the effect of sonic activation in a glass model of the root canal containing water. The canal was 10 mm in length, with an apical diameter of 0.30 mm and a taper of approximately 0.06. Imaging was performed by using a high-speed camera (Shimadzu Corp, Kyoto, Japan) at a frame rate of 4000 frames per second. From these recordings the oscillation amplitude of the tip was measured by using a calibrated reference grid (Edmund Optics, Barrington, NJ)

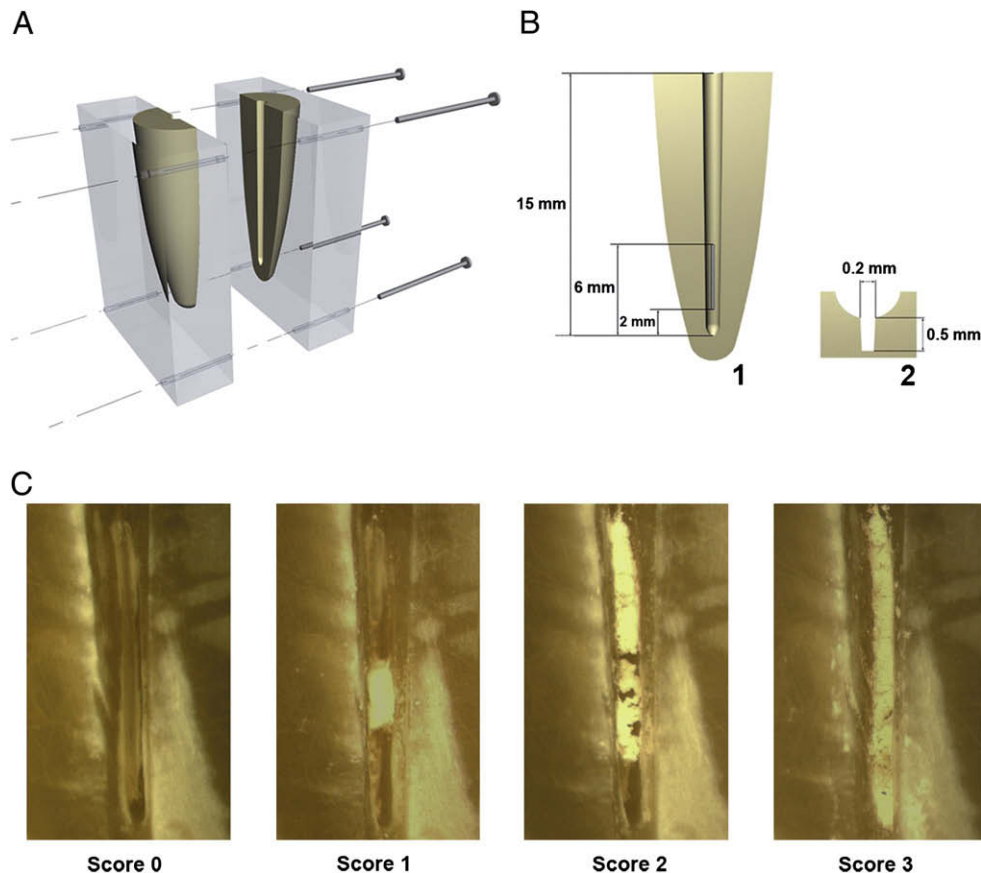
A microscope with 1.25–20× magnification was used (BX-FM; Olympus, Tokyo, Japan) for magnification. The root canal was illuminated in bright-field by a continuous wave light source (ILP-1; Olympus).

### Dentin Debris Removal Model

Straight roots from 18 extracted human maxillary canines were decoronated to obtain uniform root sections of 15 mm. The roots were embedded in self-curing resin (GC Ostron 100; GC Europe, Leuven, Belgium) and then bisected longitudinally through the canal in mesiodistal direction with a saw microtome (Leica Microsystems SP1600, Wetzlar, Germany). The surfaces of both halves were ground successively with 240-, P400-, and 600-grit sandpaper, resulting in smooth surfaces on which only little of the original root canal lumen was left. Four holes were drilled in the resin part, and the 2 halves could be reassembled by 4 self-tapping bolts through the holes (Fig. 1A).

New root canals were prepared by K-files #15/.02 (Dentsply Maillefer, Ballaigues, Switzerland) and HERO 642 (MicroMega, Besançon, France) nickel-titanium rotary instruments to a working length (WL) of 15 mm, ISO size 30, and taper 0.06, resulting in standardized root canals. During preparation, the canals were rinsed with 1 mL of 2% NaOCl after each file and delivered by a 10-mL syringe (Terumo, Leuven, Belgium) and a 30-gauge needle (Navitip; Ultradent, South Jordan, UT).

## Case Report/Clinical Techniques



**Figure 1.** (A) Schematic representations of the standardized root canal model, its groove (B-1) and cross section (B-2). (C) Examples of the different score scales.

A standard groove of 4 mm in length, 0.5 mm deep, and 0.2 mm wide, situated at 2–6 mm from WL (11) (Fig. 1B-1, B-2), was cut in the wall of one half of each root canal with a customized ultrasonic tip. A periodontal probe with an adapted 0.2-mm-wide tip was used to verify the dimension of each groove during and after preparation. The dimension of the groove is comparable to an apical oval root canal (12). Each groove was filled with dentin debris, which was mixed with 2% NaOCl for 5 minutes, to simulate a situation in which dentin debris accumulates in uninstrumented canal extensions (11). This model was introduced to standardize the root canal space and the amount of dentin debris present in the root canal before the irrigation procedure, to increase the reliability of the dentin debris removal evaluation. The methodology is sensitive, and the data are reproducible (13). A pilot study has shown that a single model could be reused up to at least 8 times without any visible defect on the surface of the canal wall. Therefore, the 18 models were used repeatedly in the 6 experimental groups,

which are the ultrasonic activated group, sonic activated groups by different frequencies or tips or irrigants, and control group (Table 1).

### Irrigation Procedure

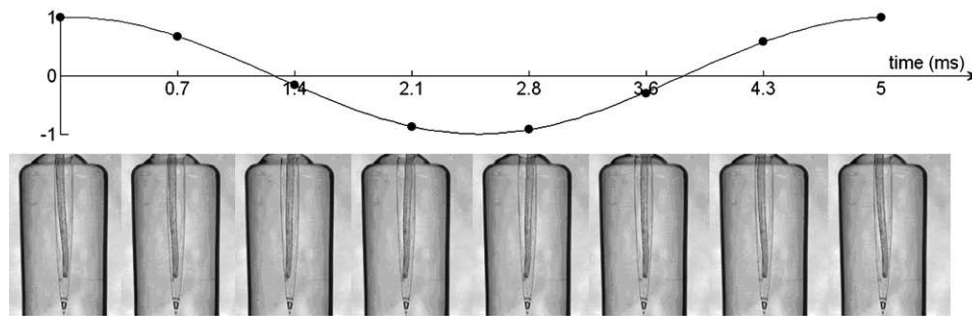
Specimens in all the experimental groups were rinsed with 2 mL irrigant (2% NaOCl or water) by using 10-mL syringes with 30-gauge needles placed 1 mm from WL. Then the residue of irrigant was passively activated for 20 seconds sonically or ultrasonically. In group 6, the sonic tip was inserted but not activated. Passive activation meant that every attempt was made to keep the file centered in the canal to minimize contact with the canal walls. This sequence was repeated twice, resulting in a total irrigation volume of 6 mL and a total irrigation time of 1 minute.

The ultrasonic activation was performed with a stainless steel #20/.00 file (Irrisafe; Satelec Acteon, Merignac, France) energized by a piezoelectronic unit (Suprasson PMax; Satelec Acteon) at power setting “blue” 4. The sonic activation was performed with the EndoActivator system.

**TABLE 1.** Experimental Groups and Number of Specimens at Each Score Rank after Irrigation Procedure

Group (n = 18)	Activation system	Frequency (Hz)	Size/taper	Irrigant	Score			
					0	1	2	3
1	Ultrasonic	30,000	#20/.00	NaOCl	16 (90%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
2	Sonic	190	#15/.02	NaOCl	3 (17%)	4 (22%)	9 (50%)	2 (11%)
3	Sonic	190	#25/.04	NaOCl	3 (17%)	6 (33%)	0 (0%)	9 (50%)
4	Sonic	160	#15/.02	NaOCl	1 (5%)	2 (11%)	12 (67%)	3 (17%)
5	Sonic	190	#15/.02	Water	0 (0%)	5 (28%)	12 (67%)	1 (5%)
6 (control)	No activation	0	#15/.02	NaOCl	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	18 (100%)

Score 0, the groove is empty; score 1, less than half of the groove is filled with debris; score 2, more than half of the groove is filled with debris; score 3, the complete groove is filled with debris.



**Figure 2.** Oscillation of the file inside the root canal during 1 oscillation at mode 3 (190 Hz), recorded with a high-speed camera at 4000 frames per second; dots on the graph indicate at which time during the oscillation the frames were recorded.

### Image Evaluation and Statistical Analyses

Before and after each irrigation procedure, the root halves were separated, and the grooves were viewed through a stereomicroscope (Stemi SV6; Carl Zeiss, Göttingen, Germany) by using a cold light source (KL 2500 LCD; Carl Zeiss). Controls verified that no debris had fallen out of the groove during the assembly or disassembly process. Pictures were taken with a digital camera (Axio Cam; Carl Zeiss) and saved as ZVI files on a computer.

The debris left in the groove after irrigation was scored independently and blindly by 3 calibrated dentists with the following score system: 0, the groove is empty; 1, less than half of the groove is filled with debris; 2, more than half of the groove is filled with debris; 3, the complete groove is filled with debris (11) (Fig. 1C). The percentage of interagreement should be more than 95%. If this percentage was lower than 95%, a consensus had to be reached.

The differences in debris scores between the groups were analyzed by means of the Kruskal-Wallis test and the Mann-Whitney test. The level of significance was set at  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

### Results

The oscillation amplitude of the sonic tips in free air and in water was, respectively,  $1.1 \pm 0.1$  mm and  $0.6 \pm 0.1$  mm at the attachment point and  $3.1 \pm 0.1$  mm and  $1.2 \pm 0.1$  mm at the free end. The sonic tip showed only one node (at the attachment point) and one anti-node (at the free end) during oscillation, confirming an earlier study (14). The actual frequencies of the sonic device turned out to be different from the frequencies listed in the sales brochure. Mode 1 was  $160 \pm 5$  Hz instead of 33 Hz (2000 cycles per minute [CPM]), mode 2 was  $175 \pm 5$  Hz instead of 100 Hz (6000 CPM), and mode 3 was  $190 \pm 5$  Hz instead of 166 Hz (10,000 CPM). The high-speed imaging experiments showed a lot of wall contact of the sonic tips during activation, and no cavitation was observed.

The 3 investigators differed in scoring 6 of the 108 specimens; agreement was reached after discussion. After irrigation, the number and the percentage of samples at each score rank are presented in Table 1. There was a statistically significant difference between the experimental groups ( $P < .0001$ ). When the irrigant was activated, significantly more dentin debris was removed than control group; ultrasonic activation was significantly more efficient than sonic activation ( $P = .0001$ ). There was no significant difference between the sonic activation groups. From the ultrasonic activated group, 89% of the canals were completely free of dentin debris, whereas from the sonic group, 5.5%–6.7% were.

### Discussion

The results indicate that activation of the irrigant enhances the removal of dentin debris from the apical root canal. Because the ultra-

sonic file or sonic tips could not physically disturb the dentin debris in the groove, it can be concluded that the activated irrigant removed the dentin debris from the groove.

The fact that ultrasonic activation removed significantly more dentin debris than the sonic activation confirms the study of Sabins et al (10). A possible explanation is that the driving frequency of ultrasound (30 kHz) is higher than that of the sonic device (160–190 Hz). In principle, a higher frequency results in a higher flow velocity (15). In addition, the flow velocity also increases, with increase in the oscillation amplitude of the tip for a certain frequency (15). However, the oscillation amplitude of the sonically activated tip in water is approximately 1 mm while the diameter of the apical root canal is smaller than 0.5 mm, which implies extensive wall contact between the tip and the root canal wall. This inhibits free oscillation of the sonic tip, reducing the efficient streaming of the irrigant (15) and consequently the activation of the irrigant. This is confirmed both by the outcome of dentin debris removal and by the visualization experiment in which wall contact was observed (Fig. 2).

The difference between the lowest (160 Hz) and the highest (190 Hz) oscillation frequency of EndoActivator as we have tested is small, implying only small differences in streaming between frequency settings. That explained why there was no significant difference between the 2 frequency settings of the sonic activation.

It was also observed that no cavitation seemed to take place either on the sonic tip itself or on the wall of the glass model of the root canal. This can be related to the velocity of the sonic tip, which was below the threshold needed for cavitation. Such a cavitation threshold can be determined by estimating the pressure required. If the pressure falls below the vapor pressure by a magnitude of the tensile strength, then rupture of the fluid can occur (cavitation). The tensile strength of pure water is very high, and therefore cavitation is often unobtainable. In many practical situations, however, there are microscopic voids containing gas on the interface between a solid surface (contaminant particles, cracks in the container) and the fluid. These nucleation sites have a much lower tensile strength and therefore make cavitation possible at much lower pressures. To get cavitation, the pressure decrease  $\Delta P$  must exceed the ambient pressure (1 atm or  $10^5$  Pa) plus the vapor pressure of the fluid (2000 Pa) (16). In first approximation the velocity  $u$  leading to an onset of cavitation can be obtained from the Bernoulli equation:

$$\frac{1}{2}\rho u^2 = \Delta P \quad (\text{equation 1}).$$

Roughly speaking then, the left-hand term of equation 1 should be larger than  $10^5$  Pa. By using  $\rho = 1000$  kg/m<sup>3</sup> for water, the threshold velocity  $u$  is approximately 14 m/s. A sinusoidal oscillation at a frequency of 190 Hz and with an oscillation amplitude of 1.2 mm gives

## Case Report/Clinical Techniques

a velocity of only 1.4 m/s. An ultrasonic file, typically driven at 30 kHz and with an oscillation amplitude of 75  $\mu\text{m}$ , reaches velocities above this threshold and can therefore generate cavitation, as previously observed by Ahmad et al (15).

There are 3 types of EndoActivator tips currently available, #15/.02, #25/.04, and #35/.04. A different dimension of the tip applied in the same size root canal might produce different oscillations and irrigant flow, which could influence the effectiveness of the instruments. The size of the standardized model used in this study was #30/.06, which is clinically relevant. Therefore we tested the #15/.02 and #25/.04 tips. The #35/.04 tip should be tested with larger size and tapered root canal, so we did not include it. The results showed that there was no difference between the 2 types of sonic tips in amplitude, oscillatory pattern, or wall contact. The irrigant flow and streaming pattern of the irrigant were therefore equal, resulting in the same effectiveness of the irrigation.

There was no significant difference between NaOCl and water as irrigant when it was sonically activated. Because the fluidic properties of water and NaOCl are comparable (17), no differences in acoustic streaming between them were to be expected.

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