

# Taking the Trouble Out of Troubleshooting Is It the Column, Method, or Instrument

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September 29, 2016

# What Do We Troubleshoot

Typical LC troubleshooting approach asks:

- What's wrong with my column?
- What's wrong with my instrument?

**But** our separations are controlled by more than just the column or instrument. The **better question** to ask is -

*Why doesn't my separation work as expected?*

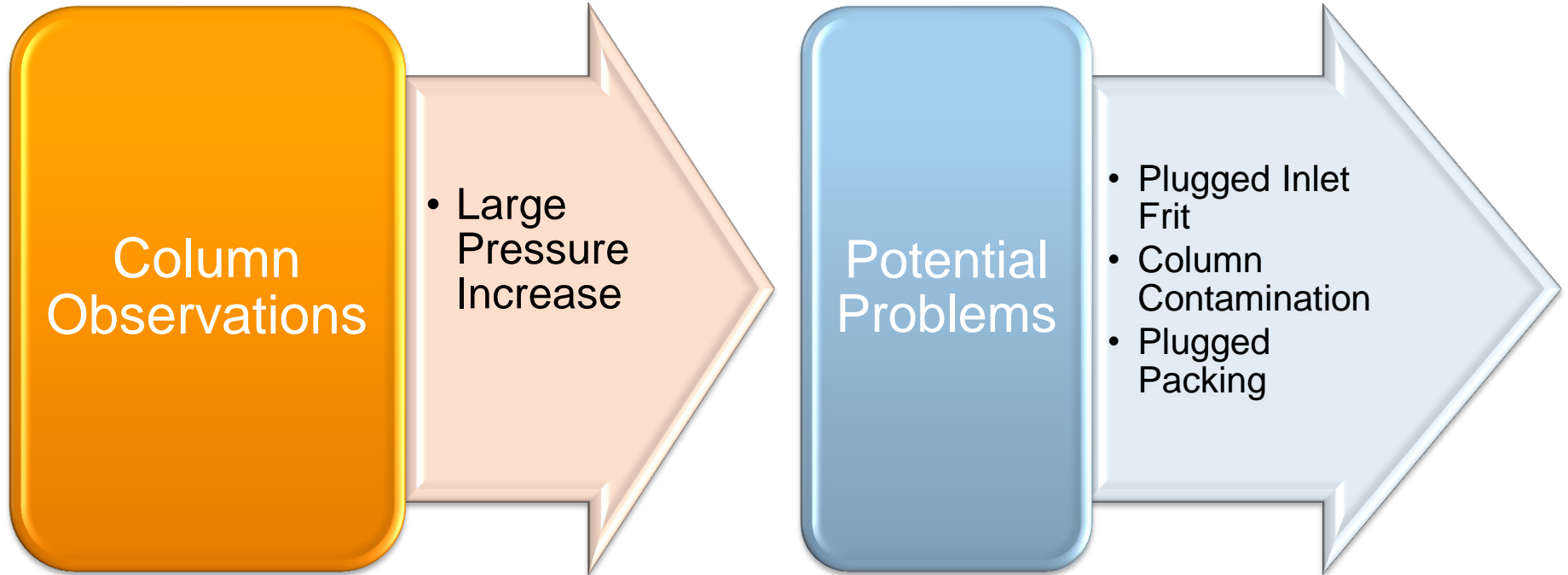
**And** the answer could be there is a problem with the column, instrument or something else (sample, mobile phase, etc.)

# Why Doesn't My Separation Work as Expected?

## Finding the Answer

- Discuss some of the most commonly observed column related issues in HPLC
  - System pressure
  - Peak shape
  - Retention/Selectivity
- Explore reasons for problems
- Preventive measures

# 1. Pressure Issues



Note: Low pressure is typically a connection or LC issue; unless the column has been improperly used and disassembled or lost all its packing.

# Determine the Cause and Correct

## Possible Causes

- Column inlet frit contaminated/plugged
- Frit in purge valve contaminated
- Column contaminated
- Blockage in a capillary, particularly needle seat capillary
- Rotor in injection valve plugged
- Guard or in-line filter

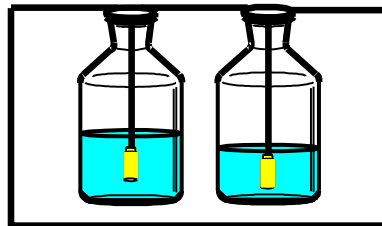
## Check pressure with/without column

### If Column pressure is high -

- Wash column (see Appendix)
  - ✓ Eliminate column contamination and plugged packing
  - ✓ high molecular weight/adsorbed compounds
  - ✓ precipitate from sample or buffer
- Back flush column
  - ✓ Clear plugged frit (check column info)

# Preventing Column Back Pressure Problems

- Filter mobile phase
  - Filter non-HPLC grade solvents
  - **Filter buffer solutions**
- Install in-line filter between auto-sampler & column (removes pump seal debris, ALS rotor debris, & sample particulates)
- Filter all samples and standards
  - Syringe; in-line
- Perform sample clean-up (i.e. SPE, LLE) on dirty samples
  - Analyte Adsorption/Matrix Adsorption
- Appropriate column flushing – flush buffers from entire system with water/organic mobile phase
- Best practice, replace buffer every 24-48 hours
  - Never add to the bottle – always use a clean new one



RRLC in-line filter, 0.2  $\mu\text{m}$  filter  
4.6 mm ID, 5067-1553  
2.1 mm ID, 5067-1551



1290 Infinity in-line filter,  
0.3  $\mu\text{m}$ , 1200 bar, 5067-4638

# Captiva Filtration and it's Benefits



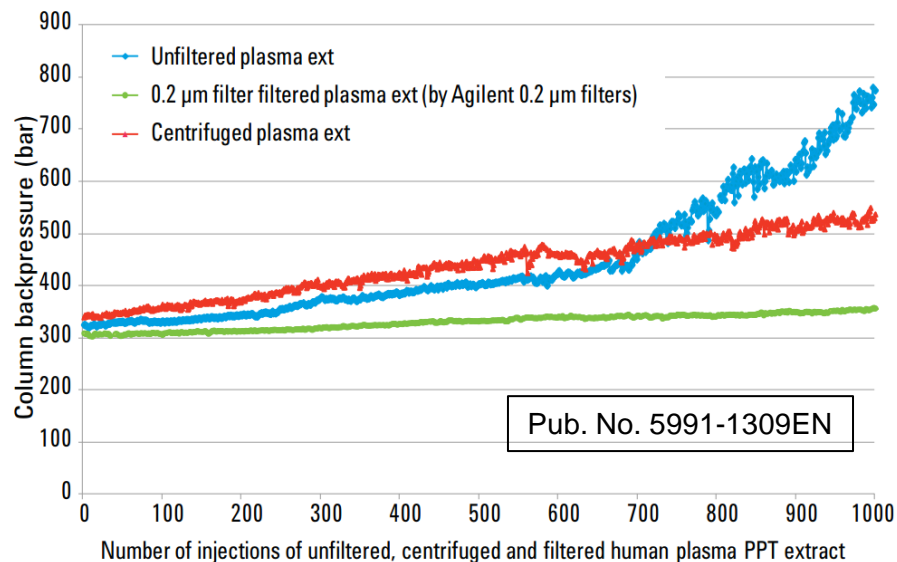
Filtration is basic sample preparation method for all kinds of samples

Physically removes particulates from the sample

Prevents blocking of capillaries, frits, and column inlet (especially for UHPLC)

Results in less downtime of the instrument for repairs

Results in less wear and tear on the critical moving parts of the injection valves



Unfiltered, centrifuged, and filtered plasma extracts  
Zorbax RRHD Eclipse Plus C18, 2.1 x 50 mm, 1.8 µm column, PN 959757-902

[Captiva Syringe Filters Guide 5991-1230EN](#)

[Syringe Filter Selection Tool](#)

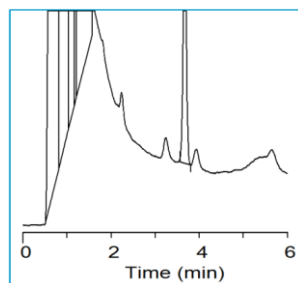
# Why perform Sample Preparation?

To acquire desired sensitivity/selectivity

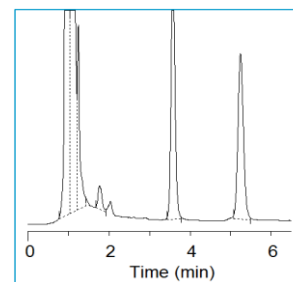
To reduce contamination/carryover issues

Use of sensitive and expensive instruments: Protect your investment!!!

Pesticides in Avocado without SP



Pesticides in Avocado with SP

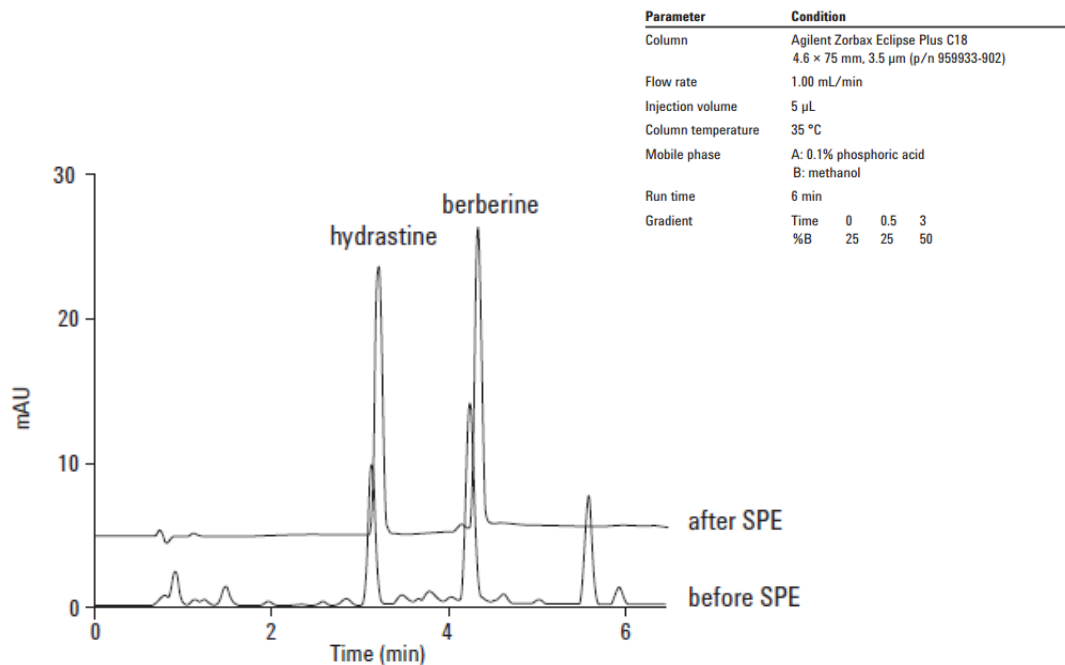




# Contaminant Peaks

## Bond Elut SPE and its Benefits

In this example, results after SPE show a decrease in the number of small peaks/removal of interferences and an increase in the intensity of the peak heights



HPLC-DAD chromatograms of hydrastine and berberine from goldenseal roots extract before and after SPE

Determination of Alkaloids in Goldenseal using Agilent Bond Elut Plexa (5990-9563EN)

# Prevent Pressure Problems *by* Preventing Microbial Growth

## ➤ Potential problems

- Increased system pressure or pressure fluctuations
- Increased column pressure, premature column failure
- Can mimic application problems
- Gradient inaccuracies
- Ghost peaks

## ➤ Prevent and/or Reduce Microbial Growth

- Use freshly prepared mobile phase
- Filter
- Do not leave mobile phase in instrument for days without flow
- Always discard “old” mobile phase
  - Do not add fresh mobile phase to old
- Use an amber solvent bottle for aqueous mobile phase
- If possible, can add
  - 5% organic added to water can be used to reduce bacterial growth
  - Few mg/l sodium azide

*Check your instrument manual for guidelines*

# Troubleshooting Pressure

## Things to Remember

### I. Continuously increasing pressure even with no injections

- Pump Seals
- Mobile Phase Particulates
- Mobile Phase Solubility
- Mobile Phase Unstable (polymerization)
- Column Void Formation (use condition dependent)
- Microbial Growth

### II. Increasing pressure with sample injections

- Sample Particulates
- Sample Not Soluble in Mobile Phase
- Sample Components Irreversibly Bound to Stationary Phase

## 2. Peak Related Issues

- Split peaks
  - Peak tailing
  - Broad peaks
  - Poor efficiency (low N)
  - Inconsistent response
  - Ghost Peaks
- Many peak shape issues are also combinations – i.e. broad and tailing or tailing with a change in retention

# Split Peaks

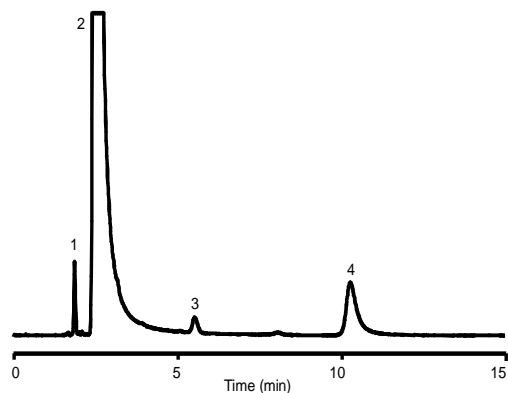
## Can be caused by:

- Column contamination
- Partially plugged frit
- Column void
- Injection solvent effects

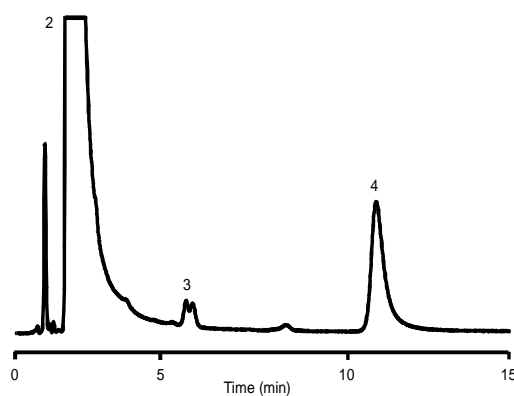
# Split Peaks Column Contamination

Column: StableBond SB-C8, 4.6 x 150 mm, 5 mm      Mobile Phase: 60% 25 mM Na<sub>2</sub>HPO<sub>4</sub>, pH 3.0 : 40% MeOH      Flow Rate: 1.0 mL/min  
Temperature: 35°C      Detection: UV 254 nm      Sample: Filtered OTC Cold Medication: 1. Pseudoephedrine    2. APAP    3. Unknown    4. Chlorpheniramine

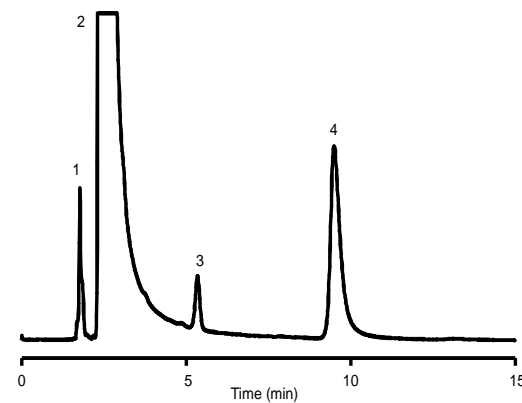
## Injection 1



## Injection 30



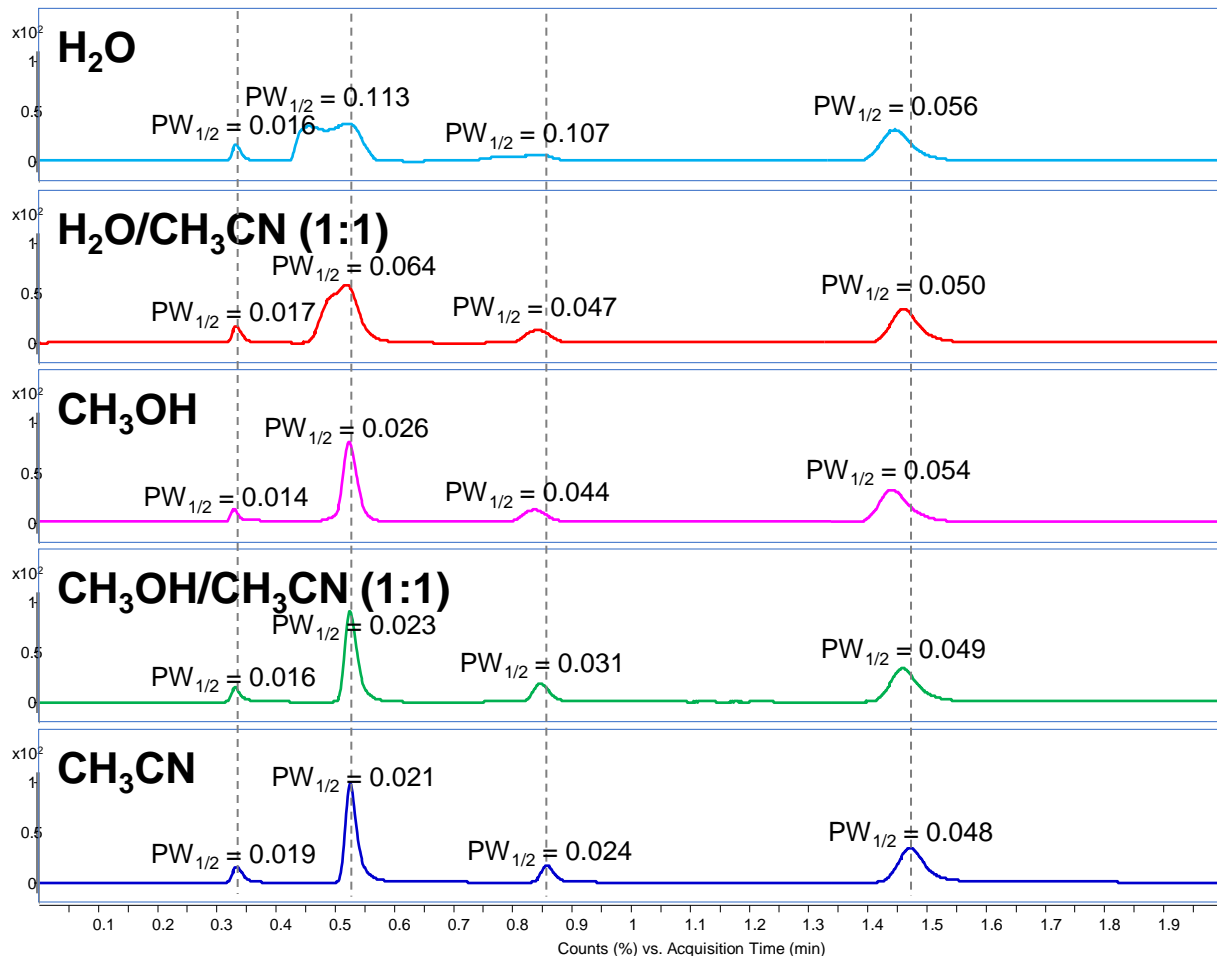
## Injection 1 After Column Wash with 100% ACN



- Column washing eliminates the peak splitting, which resulted from a contaminant on the column.

# Injection Solvent Effects - HILIC

## H<sub>2</sub>O, CH<sub>3</sub>OH, CH<sub>3</sub>CN



Agilent 1290 Infinity LC System

Agilent 6410A LC/MS

Agilent ZORBAX RRHD HILIC Plus 2.1 x 50 mm, 1.8 μm

Acetonitrile / 100 mM ammonium formate pH 3.2 (9:1)

0.4 mL/min, Pressure: 135 bar

Isocratic elution

Injection Volume: 1 μL of 5 μg/mL sample

Column: 25 °C

MS: ESI+, SIM, 200 °C, 10 L/min, 30 psi, 4000 V, 15 ms dwell time

Sample:

4-Aminobenzoic acid, m/z 138 (Frag 110 V)

Nicotinamide, m/z 123 (Frag 130 V)

Riboflavin, m/z 377 (Frag 160 V)

Nicotinic acid, m/z 124 (Frag 130 V)

➤ **Strong injection solvent can affect peak shape and retention**

# Determining the Cause of Split Peaks

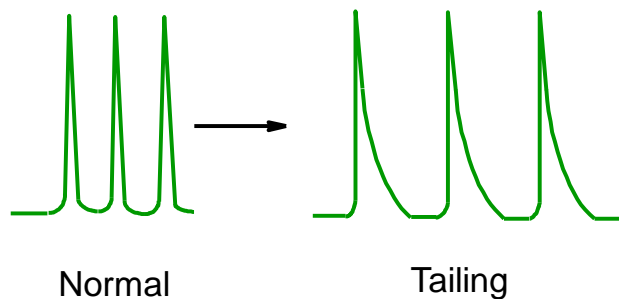
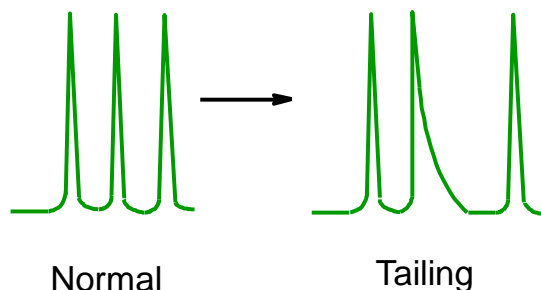
- 1. Complex sample matrix or many samples analyzed - likely column contamination or partially plugged column frit.**
- 2. Mobile phase pH > 7 – may have a column void due to silica dissolution (unless specialty column used; Poroshell 120 HpH, Zorbax Extend C18, or polymer based like PLRP-S)**
- 3. Injection solvent stronger than mobile phase - likely split *and* broad peaks, shape dependent on injection volume and k value.**



# Peak Shape: Tailing Peaks

## First Question: All Peaks or Some Peaks?

Symmetry  $> 1.2$



### Causes

#### Some Peaks Tail:

- Secondary - retention effects.
  - Residual silanol interaction
- Small peak eluting on tail of larger peak

#### All Peaks Tail:

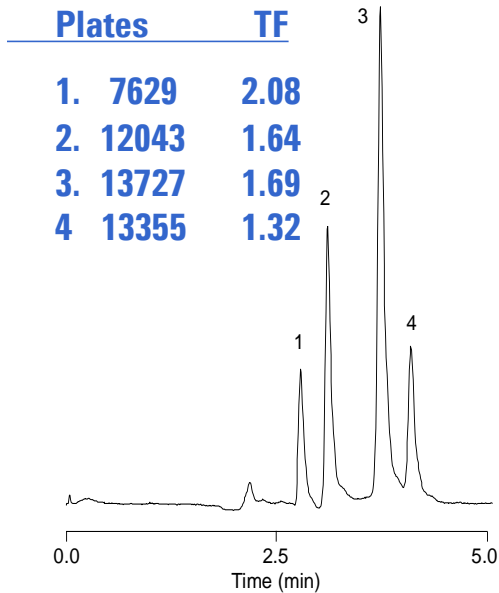
- Extra-column effects i.e. poor connections, too much volume
- Build up of contamination on column inlet (partially plugged frit)
- Bad column or bad choice of column

# Peak Tailing

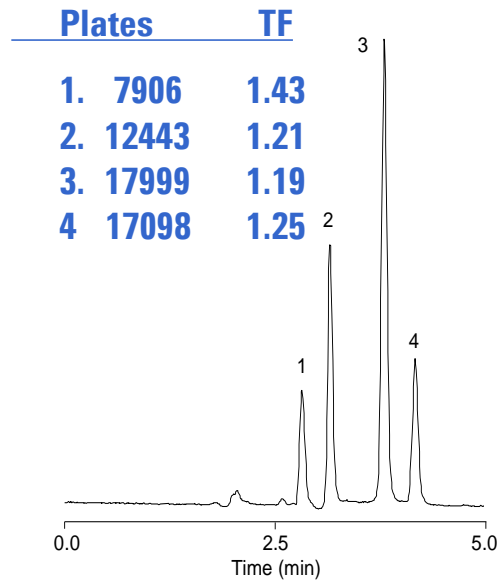
## Column Contamination

Column: StableBond SB-C8, 4.6 x 250 mm, 5 $\mu$ m      Mobile Phase: 20% H<sub>2</sub>O : 80% MeOH      Flow Rate: 1.0 mL/min  
 Temperature: R.T.      Detection: UV 254 nm      Sample: 1. Uracil    2. Phenol    3. 4-Chloronitrobenzene    4. Toluene

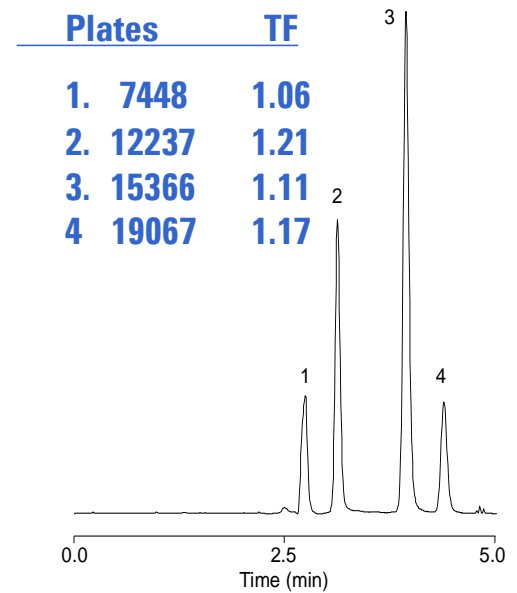
### QC test forward direction



### QC test reverse direction



### QC test after cleaning 100% IPA, 35°C

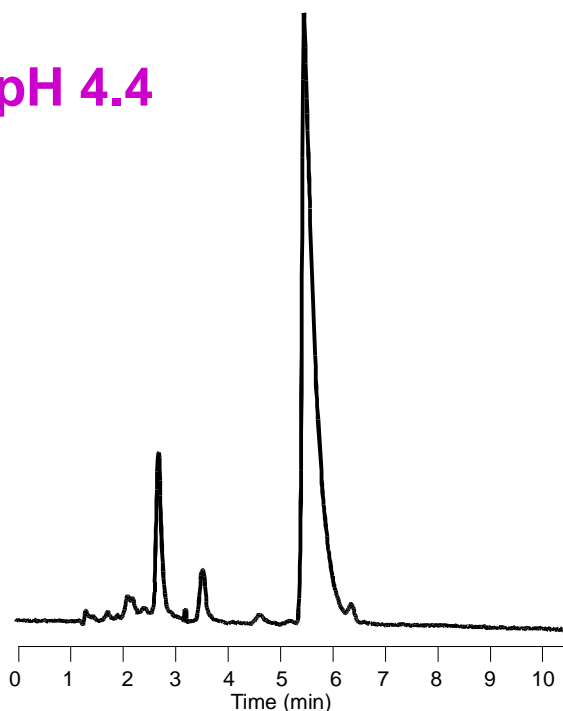


# Effect of pH on Peak Shape

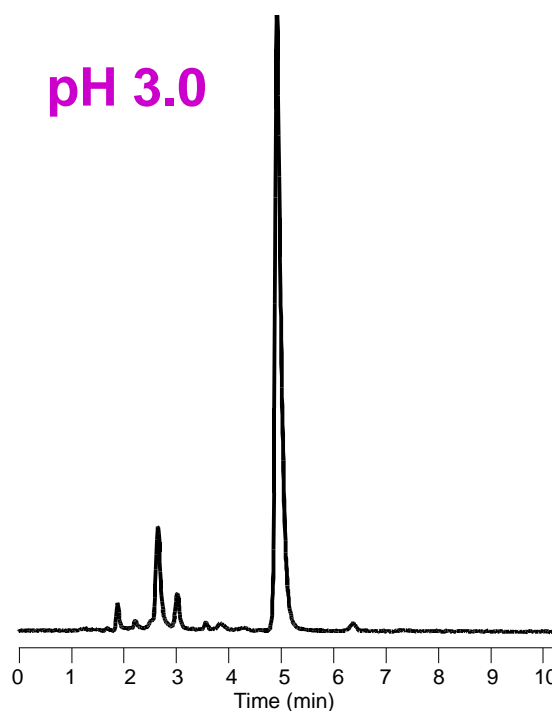
## What Happens Near the Sample pK<sub>a</sub>

Column: ZORBAX SB-C8 4.6 x 150 mm, 5 μm    Mobile Phase: 40% 5 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>: 60% ACN  
Flow Rate: 1.0 mL/min.    Temperature: RT

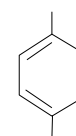
pH 4.4



pH 3.0



CH<sub>3</sub>CHCOOH



CH<sub>2</sub>CH(CH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>

**Ibuprofen**  
**pK<sub>a</sub> = 4.4**

- Inconsistent and tailing peaks may occur when operating close to an analyte's pK<sub>a</sub>; mobile phase pH should be selected to avoid this.

# Determining the Cause of Peak Tailing

- Evaluate mobile phase effects - alter mobile phase pH and/or additives to eliminate secondary interactions
- Evaluate column choice - try column with high purity silica or different bonding technology
- Reduce sample load – injection volume and concentration
- Flush column and check for aging/void
- Eliminate extra-column effects – tubing, fittings, UV cell
  - ✓ This is even more critical for today's UHPLC separations and with 2.1 mm ID columns

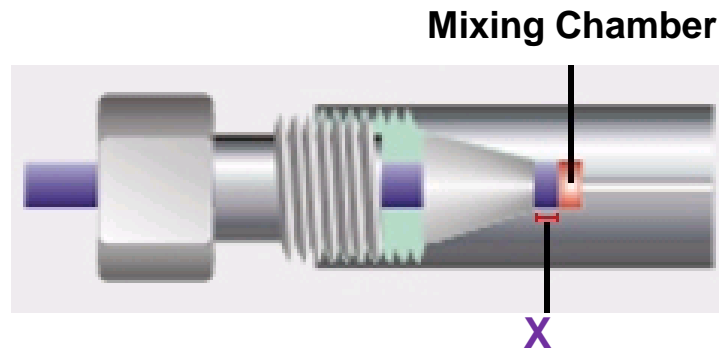
# Peak Shape and Related Problems Due to Extra Column Volume from Connections and Fittings

- ECV is volume in the LC system outside of the column
  - There will always be some in the flow path and the LC system is designed to minimize the impact of this
- Connections and fittings, if made improperly, result in areas where the flow does not move smoothly.
  - These can be fittings swaged incorrectly, to the wrong depth or incompatible fittings being used
- These unswept or poorly swept areas will cause tailing, broadening and loss of column efficiency

# Peak Tailing/Fronting

## What Happens If the Connection's Poorly Made ?

**Wrong ... too short**

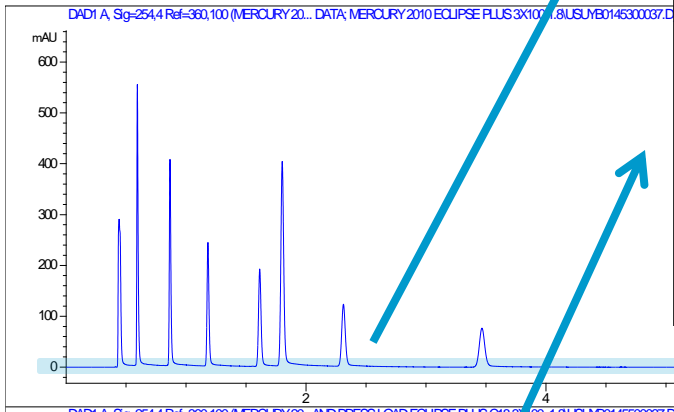
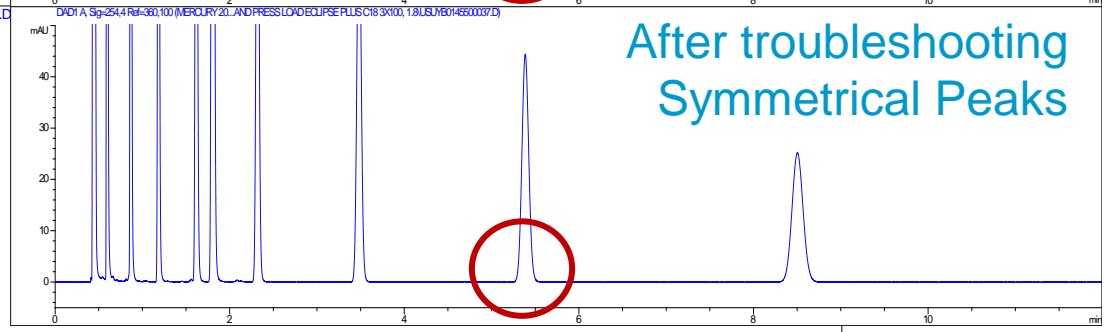
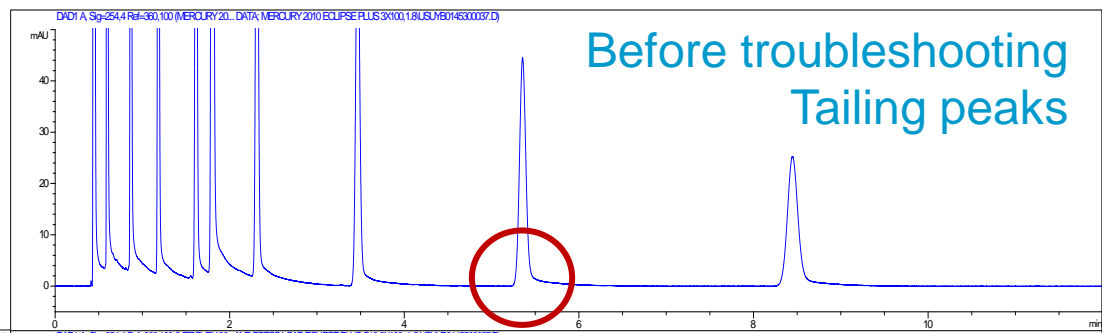


- If Dimension **X** is too short, a dead-volume, or mixing chamber, will occur
- This can broaden peaks and/or cause them to split or tails
- It will typically affect all peaks, but especially early eluting peaks

# Peak Tailing – Extra Column Effects

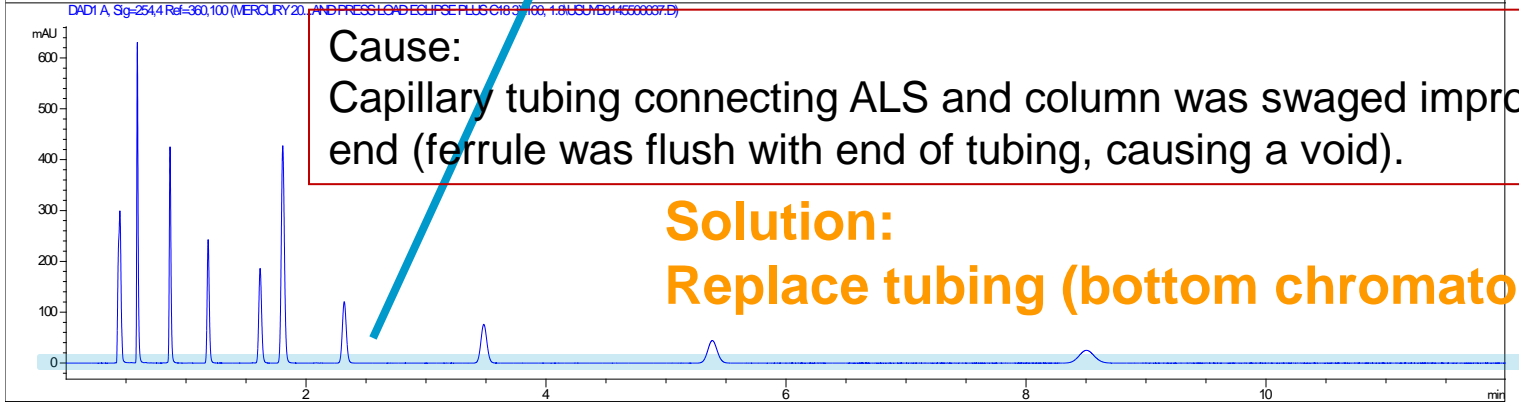
## Poor Fitting

**Problem:**  
All peaks tail  
(top chromatogram).



**Cause:**  
Capillary tubing connecting ALS and column was swaged improperly on the ALS end (ferrule was flush with end of tubing, causing a void).

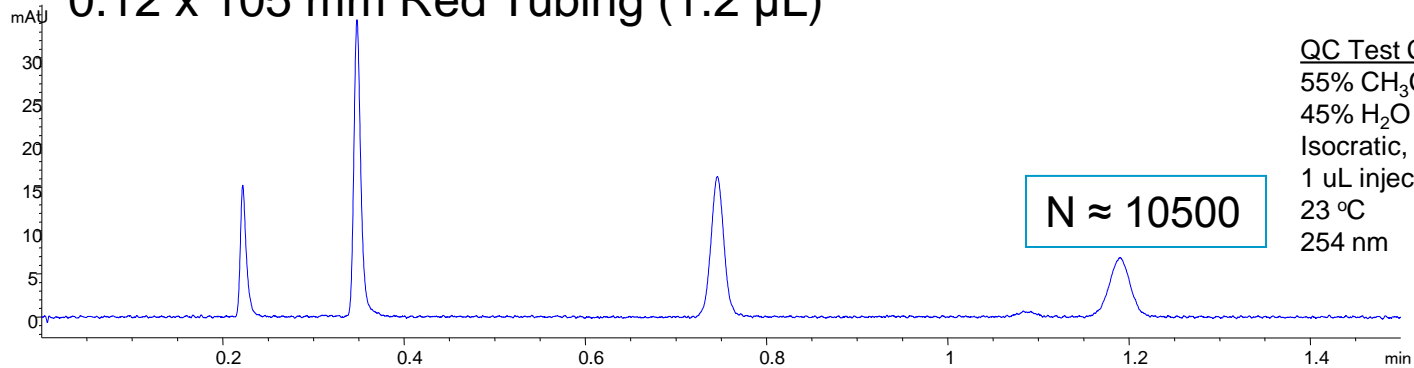
**Solution:**  
Replace tubing (bottom chromatogram).



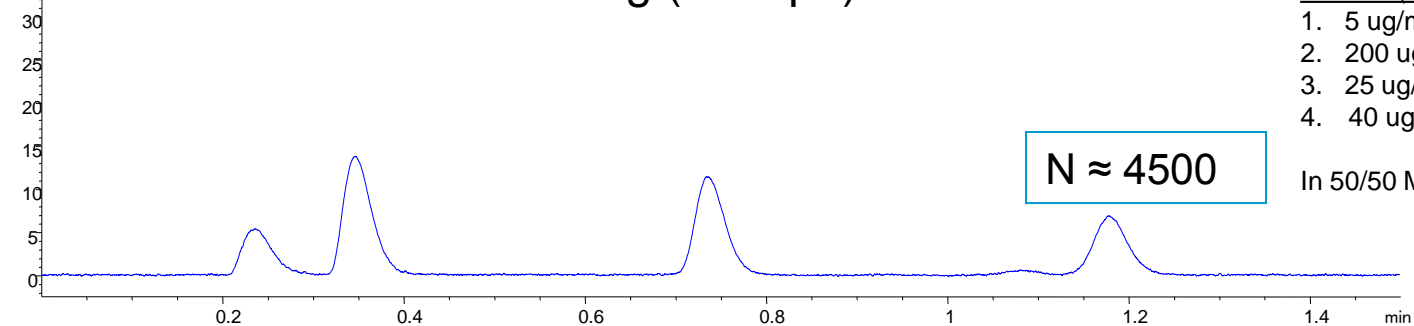
# Peak Shape - Broadening

Efficiency is greatly reduced when extra-column volume increases

0.12 x 105 mm Red Tubing (1.2  $\mu$ L)



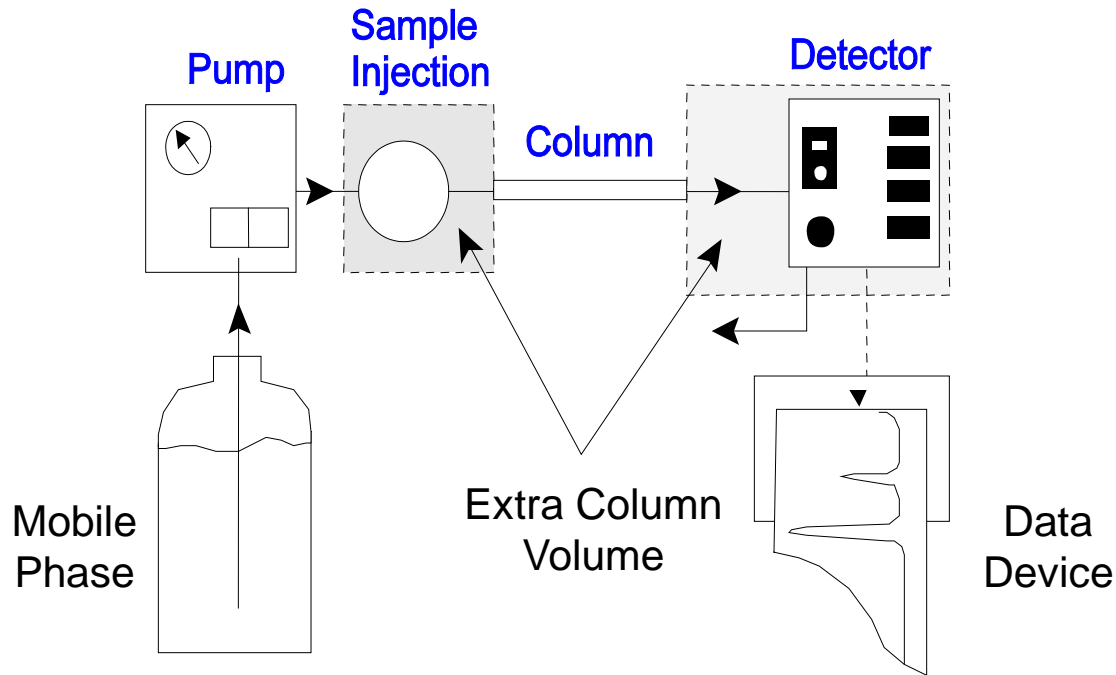
0.25 x 700 mm Blue Tubing (34.4  $\mu$ L)



QC test of a 2.1 x 50 mm, 1.8- $\mu$ m Eclipse Plus C18 showing the peak broadening when larger volume tubing is installed between the autosampler and column. 43% of the efficiency is lost with too much extra column volume



# Extra Column Volume = sample volume + connecting tube volume + fitting volume + detector cell volume

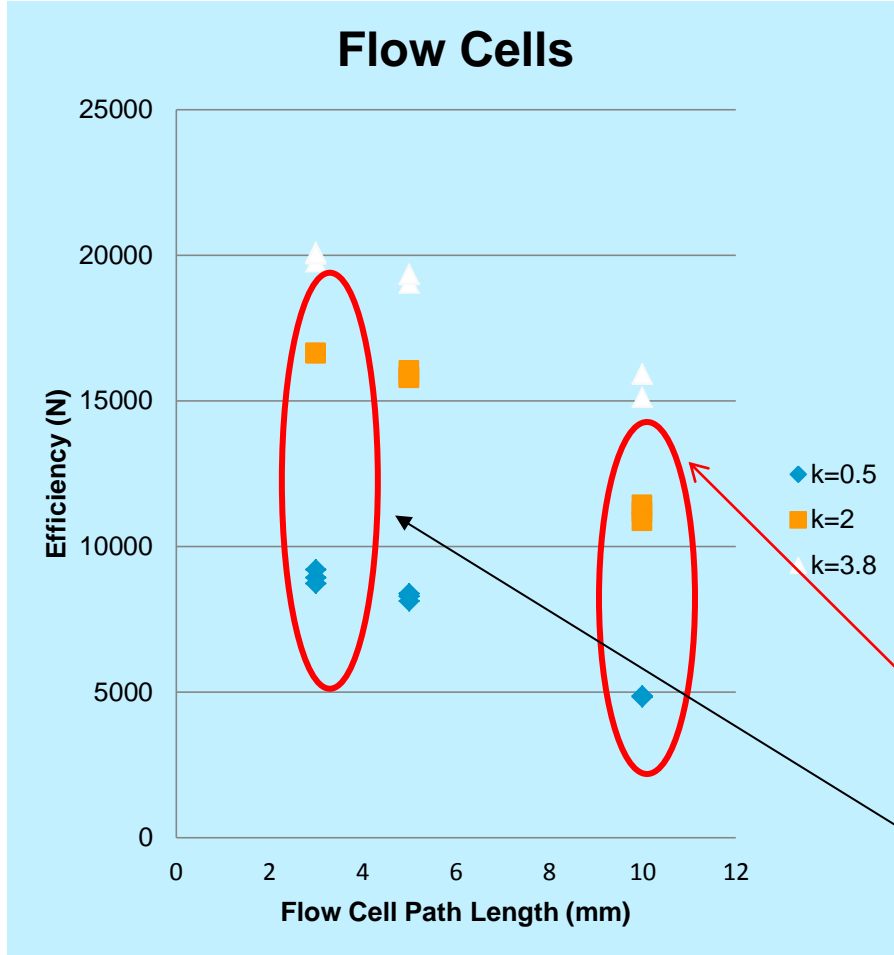


The instrument schematic above depicts where extra-column volume can occur, thus effecting instrument and column performance.

Note: More on this in “Making LC Connections”, October 24, 2016

# Effect on Efficiency Flow Cell Choice

2.1x100 mm Poroshell 120 EC-C18, PN 695775-902



Flow Cells are an integral part of HPLC instrumentation.

- Choose the best one for the column used
- Don't assume you have the best one for your column
- Peak broadening will compromise sensitivity and detection limits

*For best results, replace standard flow cells (10  $\mu$ L) with 5  $\mu$ L flow cells (2  $\mu$ L when using 2.1 mm ID columns)*

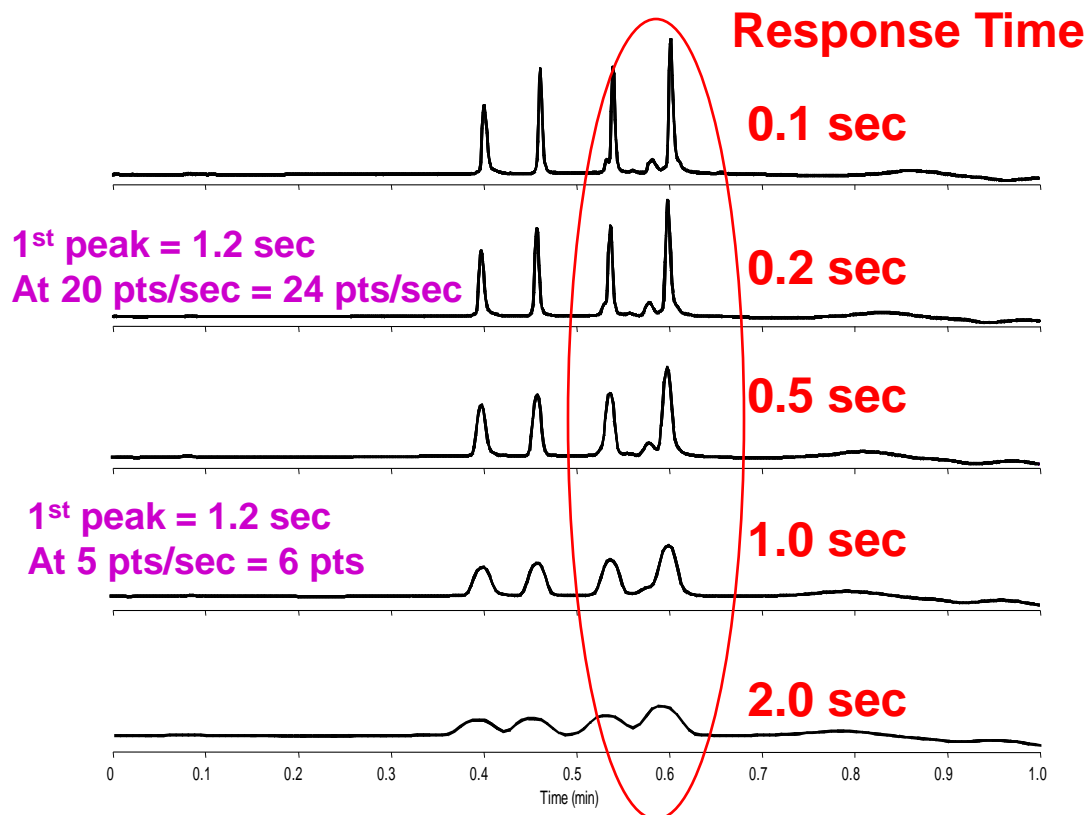
- 30% loss of efficiency with a 10 mm standard flow cell
- With 2.1 mm columns, it is best to use a 3 mm flow cell.

1  $\mu$ l QC Mix, Uracil, Phenol (k=0.5), 4-Chloronitrobenzene(k=2), Napthalene (k=3.8)  
55% MeCN:45 % Water, 0.55 ml/min micro flow cell

# Peak Shape

## Effect of Detector Response Time

It may not be a “bad column”



Agilent 1100 DAD  
Agilent 1100 WPS with ADVR

Column: **Poroshell 300SB-C18**  
2.1 x 75 mm, 5 mm

Mobile Phase:  
A: 95% H<sub>2</sub>O, 5% ACN with 0.1% TFA  
B: 5% H<sub>2</sub>O, 5% ACN with 0.1% TFA

Flow Rate: 2 mL/min

Temperature: 70°C

Detector: UV 215 nm

Piston stroke: 20

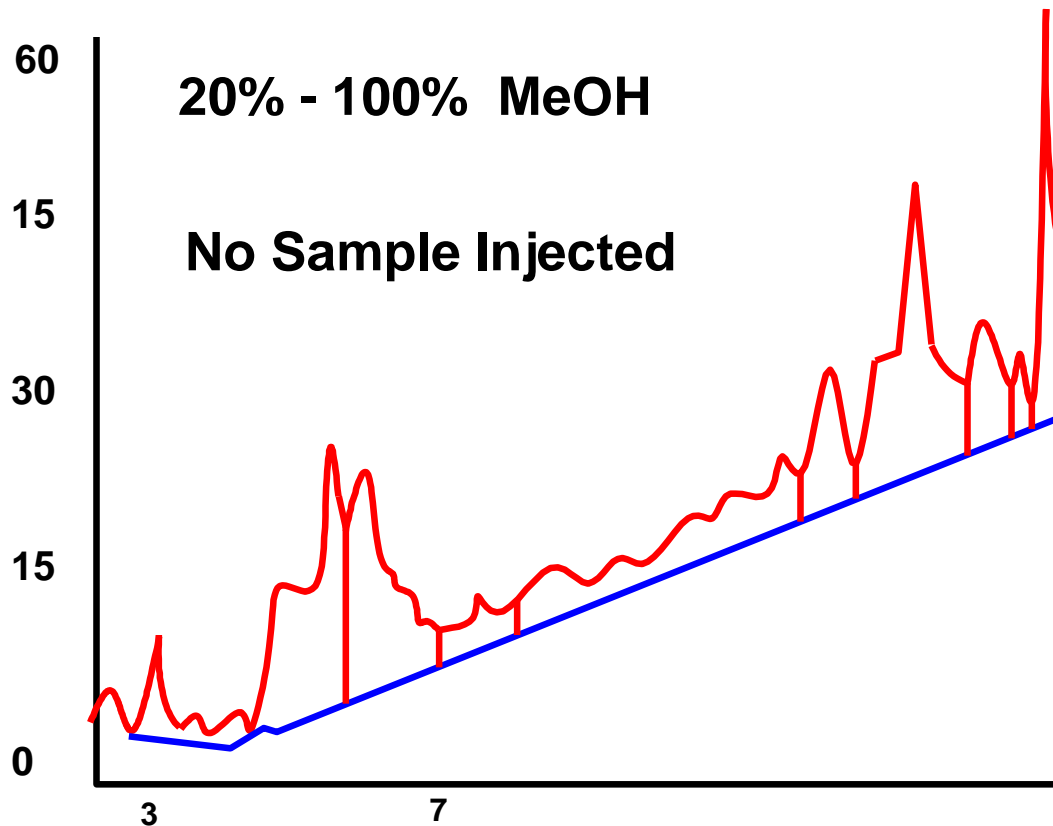
Sample:

1. Neurotensin
2. RNaseA
3. Lysozyme
4. Myoglobin

Adjust the response rate of your detector for best peak detection and shape

# Peak Shape

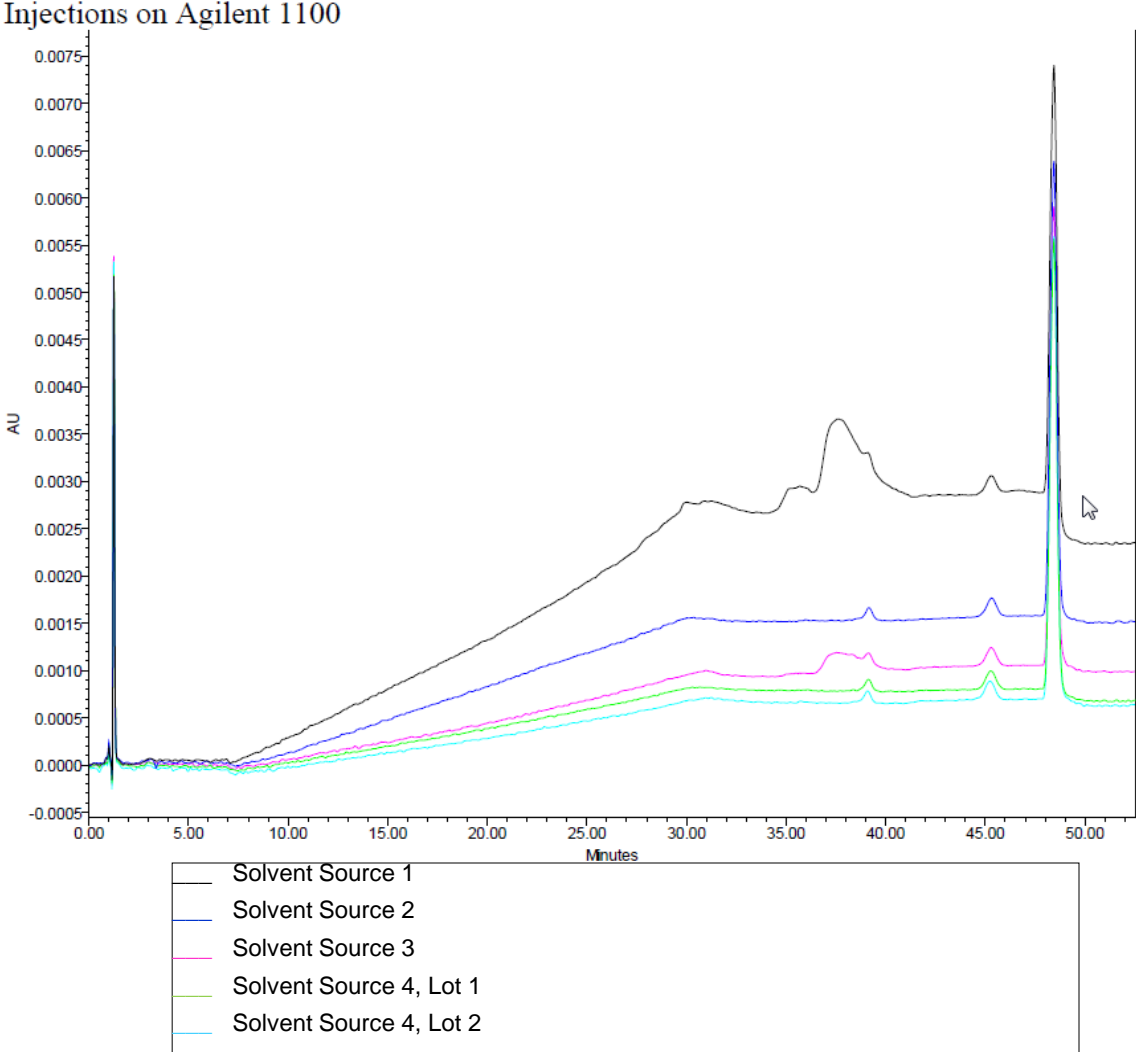
## Ghost Peaks – Even with No Sample



### Problem

- Dirty mobile phase
- Sample carryover
  - May imply poor recovery
- Peak from an early run (isocratic)

# Solvent Contamination



# Troubleshooting Peak Shape Issues

## “Usual Suspects”

- ✓ Partially blocked inlet frit
- ✓ Sample solvent strength
- ✓ Injection volume
- ✓ Sample load
- ✓ Secondary interactions
- ✓ Hardware failure (rotor, stator)
- ✓ Ghost peaks
- ✓ Metal interactions/chelation
- ✓ No or insufficient mobile phase pre-heating
- ✓ Extra column volume
- ✓ Mobile Phase

# 3. Retention Shifts/Selectivity Changes

All Peaks Shift to Lower Retention (acids, bases, neutrals)

- Loss of bonded phase
- Mobile phase unstable (less likely)
- Solvent delivery system (flow rate or mixing)

All Peaks Shift to Greater Retention

- Loss of organic solvent in aqueous/organic mix
- Column change (less likely)
- Solvent delivery system (flow rate or mixing)

Ionic Peaks Shift Retention

- Loss of volatile MP component (ionic strength, pH shift)

# Problem – Selectivity Does Not Appear the Same from Column to Column

## Details

- 3 Columns with the same bonded phase were used
- They were the same dimensions, but with different particle sizes (and therefore different lots of material)
- They were tested on the **same day**, on the **same instrument**, with the **same mobile phase**

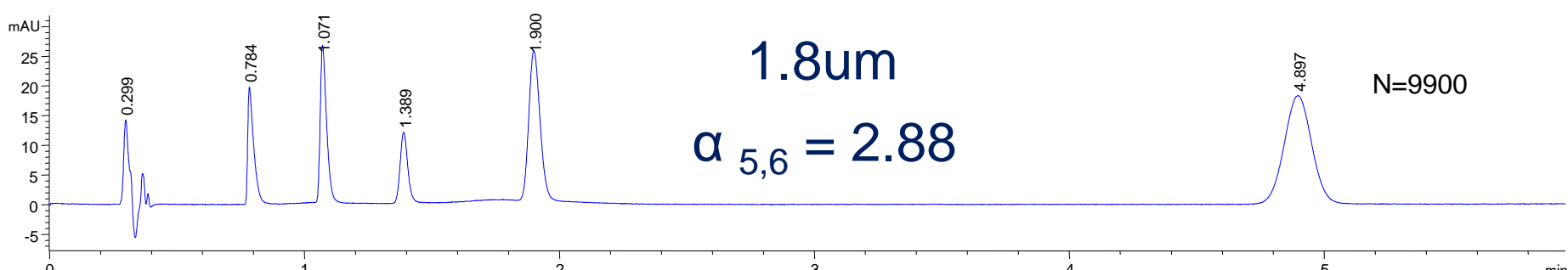
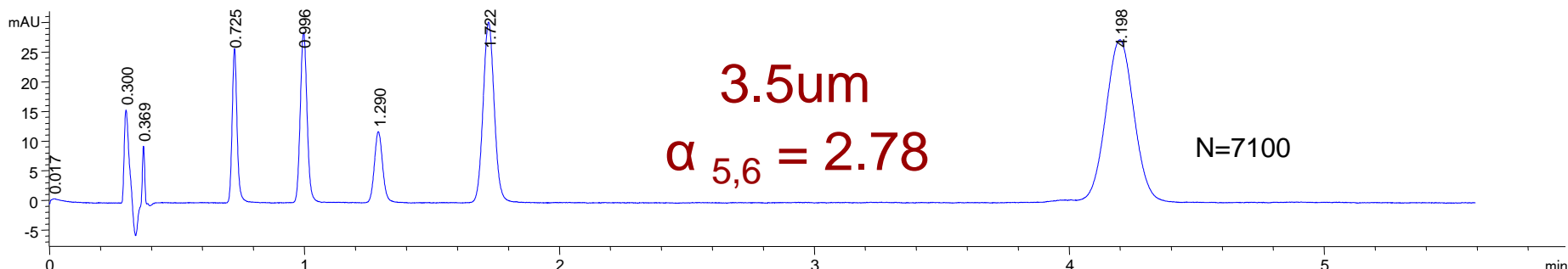
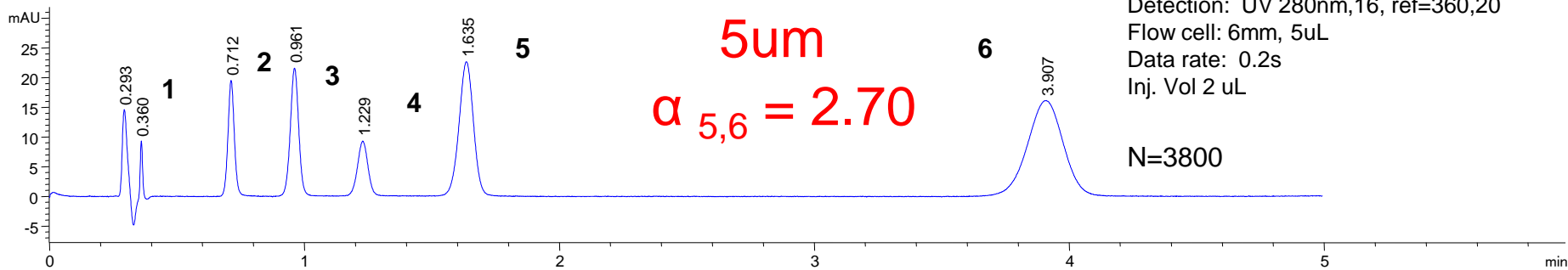
## Problem

- The retention/selectivity was different on each of the columns



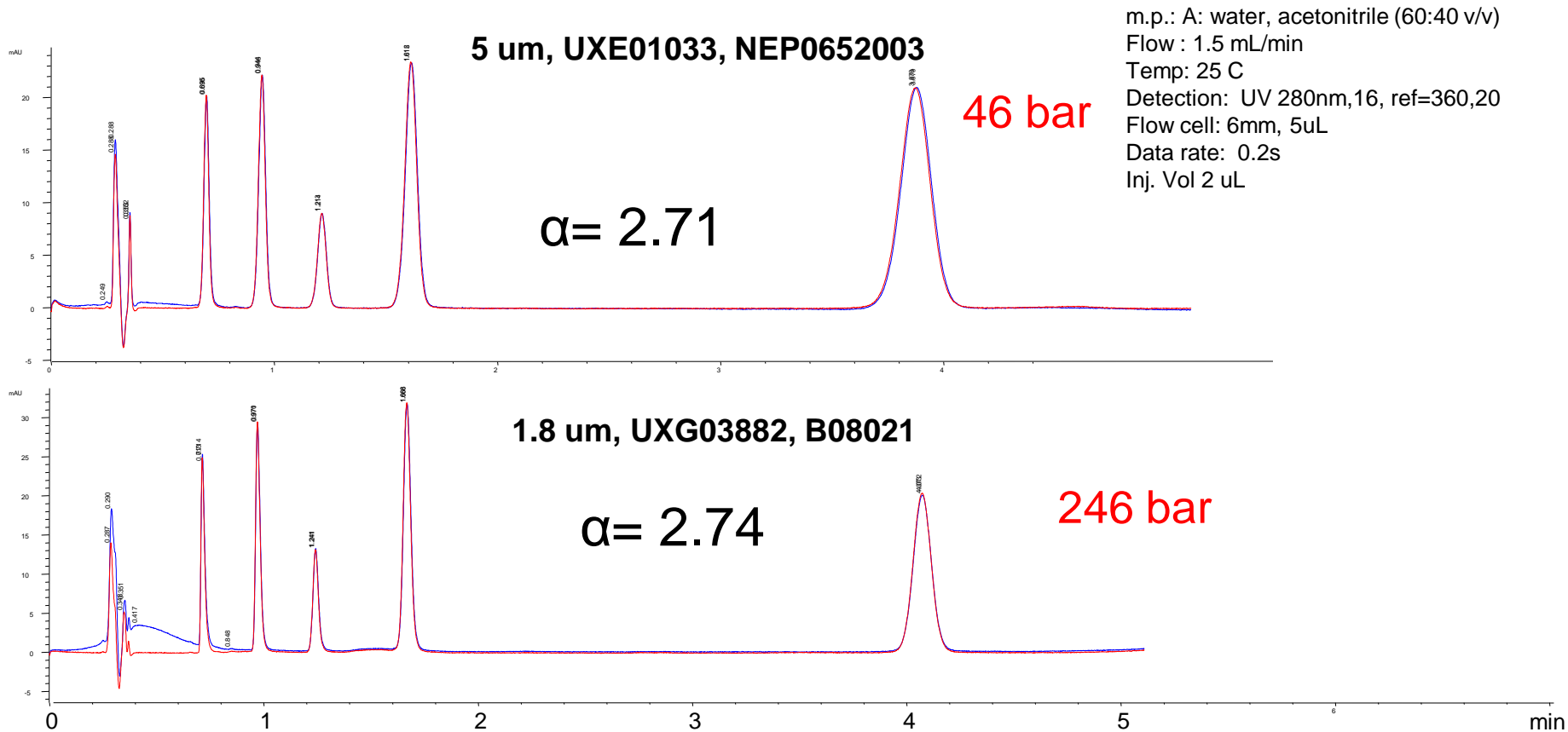
# Inconsistent Selectivity between Particle Sizes of Eclipse Plus C18, 4.6 x 50 mm,

m.p.: A: water, B: acetonitrile (60:40 A:B)  
Flow : 1.5 mL/min  
Temp: 25 C  
Detection: UV 280nm,16, ref=360,20  
Flow cell: 6mm, 5uL  
Data rate: 0.2s  
Inj. Vol 2 uL



# Problem with Proportioning Valve

## One channel premixed mobile phase shows similar $\alpha$

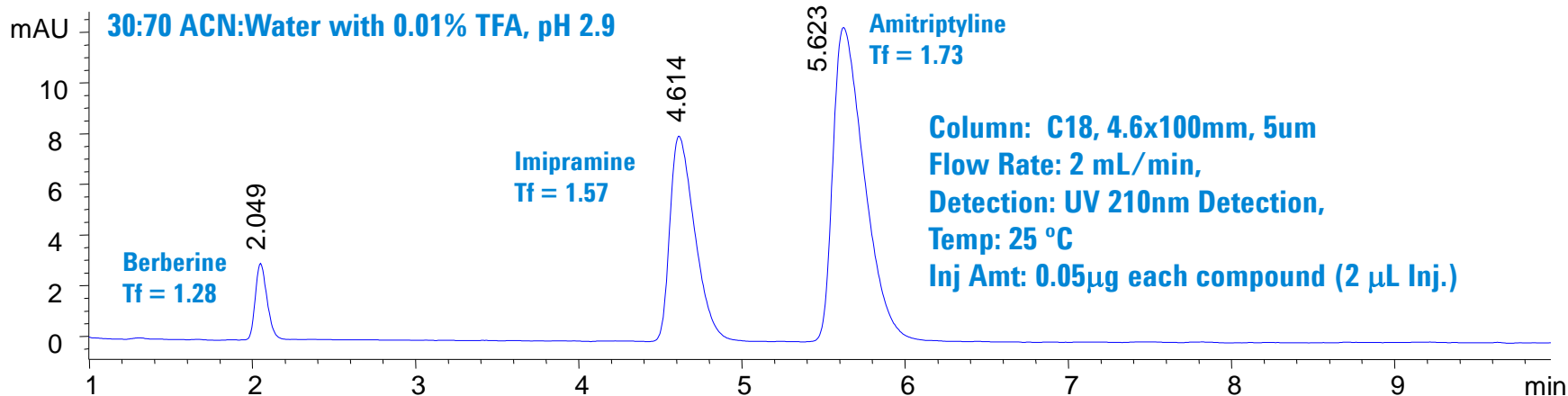
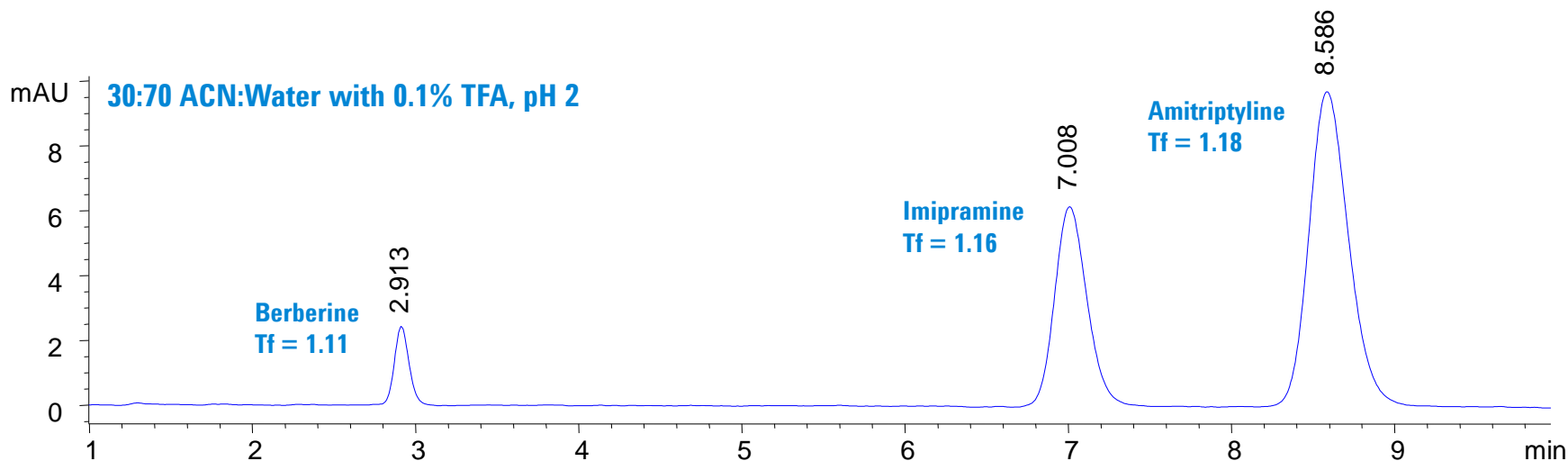


# Compare alpha values from proportioned and premixed mobile phase

Column Type	Alpha of peaks 5,6 proportioned	Alpha of peaks 5,6 premixed
5um	2.70	2.71
3.5um	2.75	2.74
1.8um	2.88	2.74

- Selectivity changes from column to column and lot-to-lot are the hardest to resolve
- Problems can be more than just the column
- Increasing pressure can make problems harder to troubleshoot
  - Proportion of mobile phase can change with pressure

# Retention Time Shifts and Peak Shape Change in Volatile Buffer Concentration



# Mobile Phase Preparation

➤ Small changes in mobile phase strength can have a large affect on retention

- ✓ HPLC grade or better
  - ✓ Buffer prep procedure
- Volume % of solvents can depend on preparation

- Be consistent
  - Document process

Specified volume ACN added to a 1 L volumetric and made to volume with H<sub>2</sub>O

≠

Specified volume H<sub>2</sub>O added to a 1 L volumetric and made to volume with ACN

≠

500 ml H<sub>2</sub>O added to 500 ml ACN

- ✓ Degree of contraction is affected by the relative quantities of each
- ✓ Temperature

# Retention

## Separation Conditions That Can Cause Changes\*

Condition	Change	Retention	Change
Flow Rate	+/- 1%	$t_R$	+/- 1%
Temperature	+/- 1 deg C	$t_R$	+/- 1 to 2%
% Organic	+/- 1%	$t_R$	+/- 5 to 10%
pH	+/- 0.01%	$t_R$	+/- 0 to 1%

\*excerpted from "Troubleshooting HPLC Systems", J. W. Dolan and L. R. Snyder, p 442.

# Troubleshooting Retention Shifts

## Mobile Phase Related Problems

- Make fresh, compare to aged
  - pH
  - conductivity
  - chromatographic test

## Column Related Problems

- Test new column
- Test current column with test mixture or e.g., Toluene
- "Wash" column and retest
- Consider effect of sample matrix

# Why Doesn't My Separation Work as Expected?

## Common Problems

- ✓ High pressure
- ✓ Undesirable peak shape
- ✓ Changes in retention/selectivity

Problems are not always associated with the column

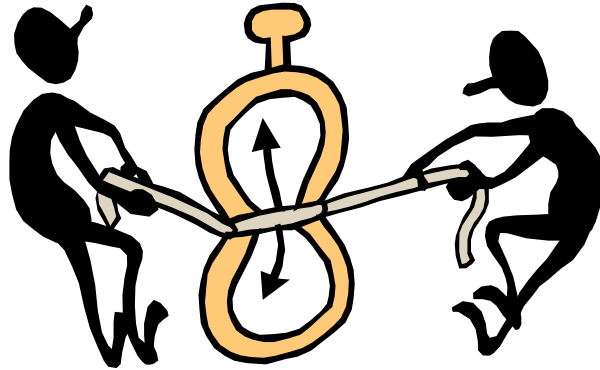
- May be caused by instrument and experimental condition issues

Take the trouble out of troubleshooting

- Use proper precautions to prevent problems

The LC Handbook, pub # 5990-7595EN  
Contact LC Column Tech Support





**The End – Thank You!**



# Agilent Technical Support

800-227-9770 (Toll Free US & Canada)

- **For LC columns**

- *Select option 3, then option 3, option 2*  
*lc-column-support@agilent.com*

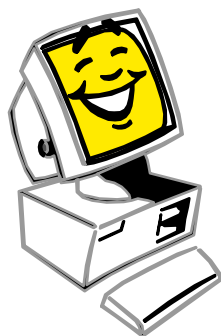
- **For GC Columns**

- *Select option 3, then option 3, option 1*  
*gc-column-support@agilent.com*

- **For Sample Prep**

- *Select option 3, then option 3, option 3*  
*spp-support@agilent.com*

[www.agilent.com/chem](http://www.agilent.com/chem)



# Appendix

# Column Cleaning

**Flush with stronger solvents than your mobile phase**  
**Make sure detector is taken out of flow path**

**Reversed-Phase Solvent Choices in Order of Increasing Strength**  
**Use at least  $10 \times V_m$  of each solvent for analytical columns**

1. Mobile phase without buffer salts (water/organic)
2. 100% Organic (MeOH or ACN)
3. Is pressure back in normal range?
4. If not, discard column or consider more drastic conditions:  
75% Acetonitrile:25% Isopropanol, then
5. 100% Isopropanol
6. 100% Methylene Chloride\*
7. 100% Hexane\*

\* When using either Hexane or Methylene Chloride the column must be flushed with Isopropanol before returning to your reversed-phase mobile phase.

# Using Buffers Successfully

## Initial Column and System Equilibration

In an appropriate vessel, test highest % organic/buffer ratio to verify that buffer will not precipitate. With stirring, add organic to buffer first, not vice versa.

Equilibrate column with, in order:

- 100% organic modifier (if brand new)
- mobile phase minus buffer
- buffered mobile phase containing highest % organic modifier (gradient high end)
- buffered mobile phase containing lowest % organic modifier (gradient low end).

Inject standard or sample several times until RTs stable, or for gradient methods, precede former with 1 or 2 blank gradients.

# Using Buffers Successfully

## Shutdown State and Instrument Flushing

### Shutdown State

Next day use—using same buffers

- Pump mobile phase very slowly (for example, 0.01 – 0.1 mL/min).

When flushing column or for longer term column storage

- Flush with 20/80 organic/water, then 80/20 organic/water or 100% organic.

### Instrument flushing

Replace column with capillary tubing. Leave disconnected from detector.

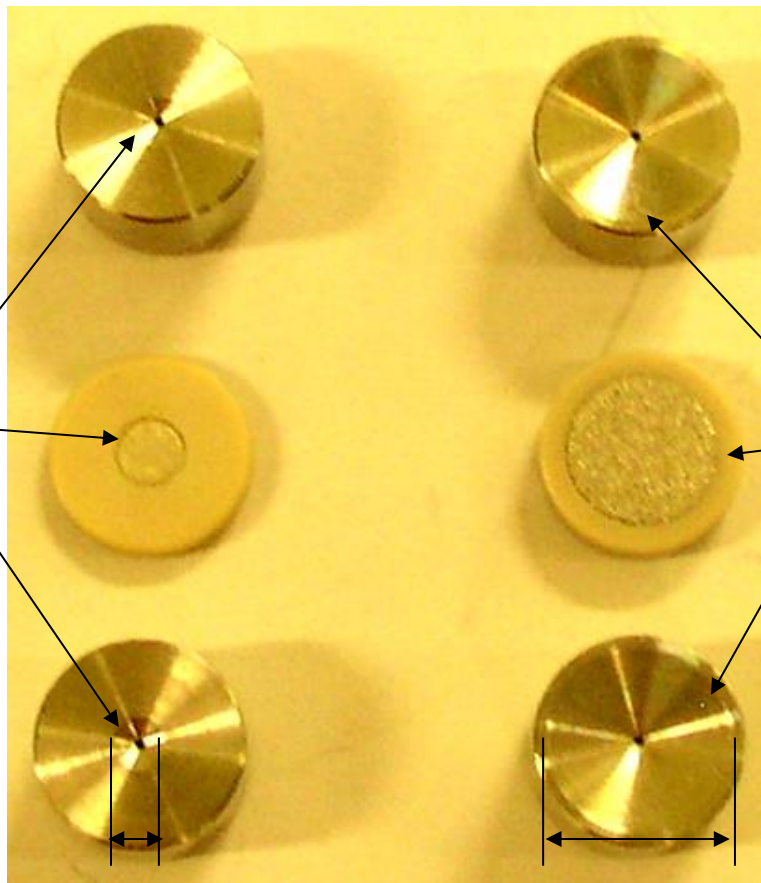
Flush pumps with water, then connect capillary tubing to detector.

Inject water 2-3 times at maximum injection volume setting.

Flush all pumps with 100% organic for long term storage.

# High Pressure In-line Filter Kit

For **2.1mm Frits** use inserts with **small cone**



For **4.6mm Frits** use inserts with **big cone**

## Assembling the High Pressure Filter Kit

Put the first insert into the frit housing.



Place the frit on top of this insert



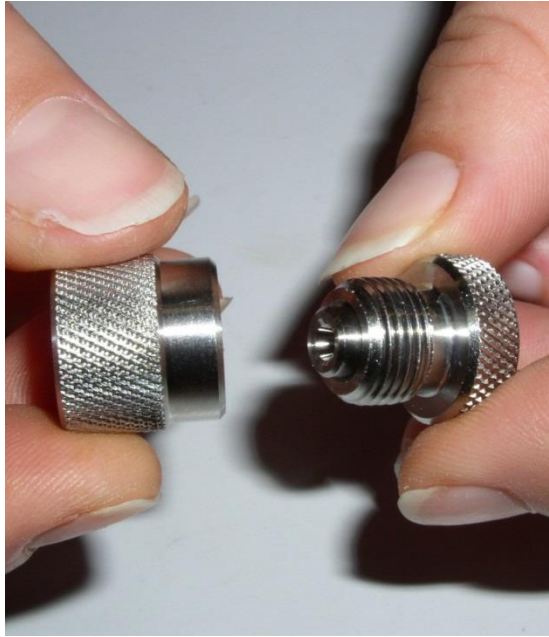
Then place the second insert on top of the frit





# Assembling the High Pressure Filter Kit

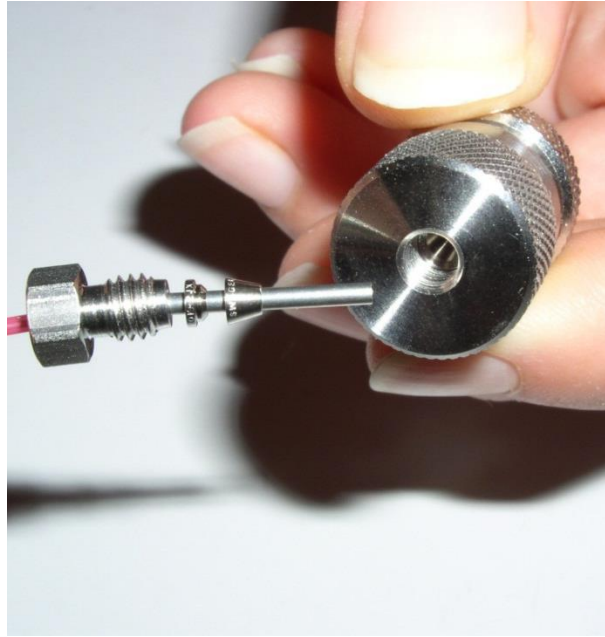
Close the frit housing, screw finger tight



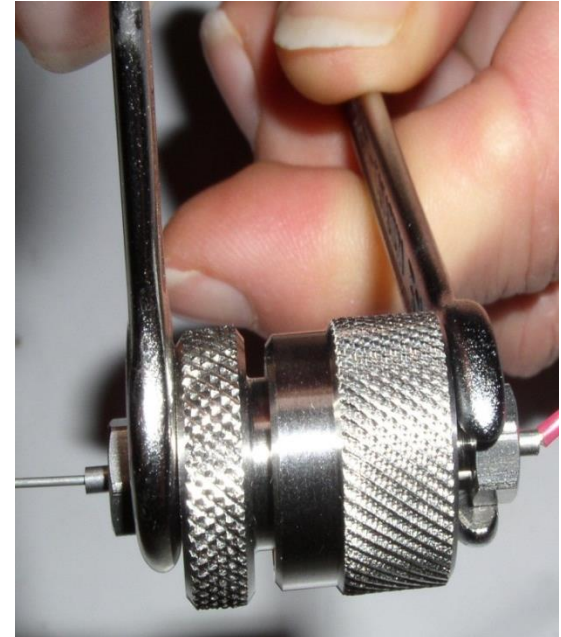
Slide the fitting, back and front ferrule onto the capillary. Insert the capillary into the frit housing bore, then tighten the fitting with your fingers.

Push the capillaries all the way in into the bore.

Connect the second capillary.



Ensure that both capillaries are still pushed all the way in into the bore. Then tighten both fittings at the same time with two 1/4" spanners. This compresses the frit assembly and assures a leak tight connection.



# Use 0.12 mm Tubing Instead of 0.17 mm Tubing

Inside Diameter (mm)	Length (mm)	Material	Color	Connections	Part Number	Volume (ul)
0.12	180	SS	Red	1 end pre-swaged	G1313-87304	2.0
0.12	280	SS	Red	1 end pre-swaged	01090-87610	3.2
0.12	105	SS	Red	1 end pre-swaged	01090-87611	1.2
0.12	150	SS	Red	pre-swaged	G1315-87312	1.7
0.12	105	SS	Red	Without fittings	5021-1820	1.2
0.12	150	SS	Red	Without fittings	5021-1821	1.7
0.12	280	SS	Red	Without fittings	5021-1822	3.2
0.12	400	SS	Red	Without fittings	5021-1823	4.5
0.17	180	SS	Green	1 end pre-swaged	G1313-87305	4.1
0.17	280	SS	Green	1 end pre-swaged	01090-87304	6.4
0.17	130	SS	Green	1 end pre-swaged	01090-87305	2.9
0.17	90	SS	Green	1 end pre-swaged	G1316-87300	2.0
0.17	105	SS	Green	Without fittings	5021-1816	2.4
0.17	150	SS	Green	Without fittings	5021-1817	3.4
0.17	280	SS	Green	Without fittings	5021-1818	6.4
0.17	400	SS	Green	Without fittings	5021-1819	9.1

Use lower volume **RED** tubing when possible

**GREEN** tubing has 2x volume of RED tubing of same length

# SPE Modes

## Analyte Adsorption (Bind-Elute )

Analyte(s) retained ( $K_D \gg 1$ )

Matrix unretained ( $K_D \sim 0$ )  
and/or strongly retained ( $K_D \gg 1$ )

Pre-concentration factor

Cleaner extracts

Load at 1-3 drops/sec (recovery  $\propto 1/\text{flow}$ )

Capacity issues may be more important

## Matrix Adsorption (Interference Removal)

Analyte(s) unretained ( $K_D \sim 0$ )

Matrix retained ( $K_D \gg 1$ )

No pre-concentration advantage

Eluates may not be as clean

Sample loading may gravity fed

Used less often than analyte adsorption

# If your sample needs further cleaning...



QuEChERS

Solid-supported liquid extraction (SLE)



Bond Elut Solid Phase Extraction (SPE)