Ultrasonic scaling in COVID-era dentistry: A quantitative assessment of aerosol spread during simulated and clinical ultrasonic scaling procedures

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Abstract
Objective: Healthcare agencies recommend limited use of aerosol-generating procedures to mitigate disease (COVID-19) transmission. However, total dispersion patterns of aerosols, particularly respirable droplets, via dental ultrasonic units is unclear. The purpose of this study was to characterize and map total spatter, droplet and aerosol dispersion during ultrasonic scaling in simulated and clinical contexts.

Methods: Ultrasonic scaling was performed on dental simulation units using methylene blue dye-stained water. All resultant stain profiles were photoanalysed to calculate droplet size and travel distance/direction. Airborne particle concentrations were also documented 0–1.2 m (0–4ft.) and 1.2–2.4 m (4–8ft.) from patients during in vivo ultrasonic scaling with a saliva ejector.

Results: Stain profiles showed droplets between 25 and 50 µm in diameter were most common, with smaller droplets closer to the mouth. In-vivo particle concentrations were uniformly low. The smallest (<1 µm, PM1) and largest (>10 µm, PM10+) particles were most common, especially within 1.2 m (4ft.) of the patient. Respirable particles (PM2.5) were uncommon.

Conclusions: Tests showed the highest concentration of small droplets in zones nearest the patient. While uncommon, particles were detected up to 2.4 m (8ft.) away. Furthermore, observed particle sizes were consistent with those that can carry infectious agents. Efforts to mitigate the spread of inhalable aerosols should emphasize proximate regions nearest the procedure, including personal protective equipment and the use of evacuation devices.

Keywords
dental hygiene, dental hygiene research, instrumentation: hand, sonic, ultrasonic, professional practice
1 | INTRODUCTION

Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is transmitted via contact with infected saliva. Oropharyngeal viral loads in symptomatic patients can be similar to those in asymptomatic patients, indicating potential viral spread by asymptomatic individuals. SARS-CoV-2-containing aerosols can travel over 1.8 m (6 ft.). Studies show virus-laden aerosols may cause surface contamination, though results on this conclusion are mixed. For example, one recent study found that SARS-CoV-2 was not detected in settled dental aerosols, perhaps due to a dilution effect of irrigation solution. They further found that few microbiota detected in dental aerosols arise from patient saliva and that most biological contaminants found within 1.8m (6 ft.) of the patient are bacteria sourced to the irrigation system. However, most dental aerosol studies have relied on limited-sampling, close-proximity methods to infer the likelihood of viral contamination. This means that viral transmission via dental aerosols cannot be ruled out until more comprehensive studies are performed to assess the patterns of total aerosol dispersion in different clinical environments, as well as the ability for these aerosols to transport viruses like SARS-CoV-2.

Spatter (>100 µm in diameter), droplets (5–100 µm diameter) and aerosols (particles <5 µm) can travel well beyond the zones immediately surrounding a patient’s mouth depending on droplet or particle size. Spatter typically follows a bullet-like trajectory away from the operative site until surface contact. These larger salivary droplets tend to settle quickly onto the patient’s chest and other proximate locations. Aerosols, however, can remain suspended for longer periods, with their small aerodynamic diameter increasing the likelihood of inhalation. Particles under 10µm can reach deep in the respiratory tract where viral transmission may occur. SARS-CoV-2 has been detected in airborne particles ranging from 0.25 µm to over 4 µm. A recent study evaluating the particle size produced during various dental procedures showed that ultrasonic scaling produced both spatter (median diameter of 300 µm) and aerosols (median diameter of 1.38 µm) up to 100 cm (39.37 in) from the mouth, the furthest point at which data were collected. To date, most research on dental aerosols, including the real-time studies cited above, use fluorescent dyes or bacterial colony-forming units (CFUs) to understand aerosol spread following dental procedures. These methods typically rely on ‘spot collection’ wherein contamination is assessed at relatively few surface locations in an examination room, on personal protective equipment (PPE), or other limited areas. Furthermore, the direction that a droplet or particle travels is often not included in the study design. These points are important given that the pattern of aerosol concentration (and associated contamination risks) is a product of both travel distance and direction. Therefore, the placement of sampling points likely has a considerable effect on subsequent results.

Here, two complimentary tests were used to determine particle and droplet size and dispersion during ultrasonic scaling: [1] A simulation showing cumulative droplet distributions on all surfaces proximate to the operator and patient in a controlled environment (hereafter referred to as ‘simulation test’) and [2] a real-time assessment of airborne particle concentrations at a broader distance range during multiple in vivo ultrasonic scaling sessions in a dental clinic (‘real-time test’). This study design allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of aerosols, including the travel range, travel direction, concentration and size distribution of droplets and particles ≥0.1 µm that are produced during ultrasonic scaling. When combined with other emerging studies, this provides important context for viral transmission risks.

2 | STUDY POPULATION AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Simulation test

2.1.1 | Experimental parameters and protocols

This test was conducted in a simulation clinic equipped with a dental simulation unit or DSU (KaVo Dental, Brea, CA). The DSU was
positioned in full recline with the mouth 71.1cm (28in.) above floor level atop a 2.7 x 2.7 m (9 x 9 ft.) section of white paper on which a 2.4 x 2.4m (8 x 8 ft.) perimeter was drawn. After the procedure, the paper was marked with a grid, quadrants and key landmarks to facilitate later digitization (Figure 1). The water reservoir of a Dentsply Cavitron was filled with 500cc reverse osmosis (RO) water and 0.5 g methylene blue dye, after which an experienced operator performed ultrasonic scaling on typodont teeth #6–11 for 5 minutes using a saliva ejector continuously (50% power and lavage, water flow rate 18 mL/min). Afterwards, the paper was left undisturbed for 10 minutes to allow stain-bearing droplets and spatter to settle and dry.

2.1.2 Data collection

Pilot tests were conducted using variably sized floorplan grids containing droplets of different sizes and concentrations. These confirmed that a series of five overlapping photographs of each box in a 7.6 x 7.6 cm [3 x 3in.] grid system [camera height 30.5 cm (12in.)] were necessary to acquire high-resolution images (preservation of smallest droplets) and a sufficient number of landmarks to facilitate undistorted composite photograph creation (Fig. S1). The floorplan was systematically photographed using a Nikon D3400 series DSLR camera and zoom lens (AF-P DX NIKKOR 18-55mm) with flash and lens perpendicular to the floor. High-resolution composite images of large floorplan regions were generated with Photoshop version 20.0.9 (Adobe, San Jose, CA, USA). Composite images were exported as uncompressed TIFs. ImageJ was used to scale and threshold the images to isolate stain profiles of blue droplets. Regions of interest (ROIs) were created to demarcate specific zones corresponding to the distance from origin (patient’s mouth) (Figure 1). Particles in each ROI were counted using the Analyze Particles feature. Each image was inspected for obvious non-stain particles (eg hair, dust and debris). Associated data points and highly elongated stains were removed to ensure isolation of true droplets and spatter.

Stain profiles produced by droplets upon surface contact are a product of speed, direction upon impact, droplet properties (viscosity, density and surface tension) and substrate (surface roughness). To calculate droplet diameter, the minimum Feret diameter for each stain profile was applied to published formulae to estimate droplet diameter for water on paper using the Swath Kit™ system, whose imaging technology had a resolution most comparable to ours. Based on the resolution limits of our camera, the smallest reliably detectable stain profile had a diameter of 23.26 µm. This corresponded to a droplet diameter of 9.07 µm as estimated by the Swath Kit™ formula [Droplet = – 4.42 + (0.583*Stain Diameter) – (0.000132*Stain Diameter^2)]. As droplet velocity was unknown, droplet size predictions are approximations that convey a general idea of airborne droplet size. However, values are generally faithful when stain profiles are not scalloped (indicating low-velocity impact) as was true here.

2.2 Real-time test

2.2.1 Experimental parameters and protocols

Aerosolized particle concentrations were quantified in real time during full mouth ultrasonic scaling on 6 volunteers in a large dental clinic. All procedures were performed by a single licensed, registered dental hygienist using a saliva ejector. A light-scattering laser photometer aerosol monitor (AM) (DustTrak 8533; TSI Incorporated, Shoreview, MN) measured airborne particle concentrations throughout the procedures during clinic closure to eliminate the inclusion of particles from unrelated procedures. The AM quantified real-time mass concentration and size range of particles under 15 µm (ie smaller than can be detected photographically) at distances beyond the 1.2 m (4 ft.) in the simulation test.

To assess real-time particle spread, particle concentrations were documented every second during ultrasonic scaling in two zones: [1] 0–1.2 m (0–4 ft.) from the patient’s head at various locations and [2] 1.2–2.4 m (4–8 ft.) from the patient’s head [data were not collected in the 0–1.2 m (0–4 ft.) range for one patient]. Baseline clinic particle concentrations were collected over two 7-hour periods of clinic closure. Particle concentrations were reported in 5 size ranges (Table S1) up to concentrations of 150µg/m^3 with a sensitivity of 0.001µg/m^3 (Table S2). To capture data commensurate with the stain tests and to control for differences in procedure length between participants, data were extracted from a standardized, 5-minute timeframe at the midpoint of each procedure.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Simulated test: droplet size and dispersion

The mean laboratory temperature was 21.1°C (range 19.9–22.0°C). An ANOVA with post hoc Tukey showed significant interaction between zone and quadrant, indicating a significant effect of distance (zone) and direction (quadrant) on droplet size distributions (SE: P-value < 0.001, F = 269.4). No stain droplets were detected beyond zone 15 [beyond 1.2 m (46.5in)].

The sizes of droplets and spatter produced across all tests ranged from 9.1 to 605.4 µm, with considerable variation in mean droplet size depending on zone. The smallest droplets were seen in zones 4–6 [25.4–50.8 cm (10–20in.) from the patient’s mouth] and larger droplets at zone 10 and further [72.4+cm (28.5+in.)] (Table 1). Of the four smallest sizes observed, droplets with diameters between 25 and 50 µm were most prevalent in each zone (Fig. S2).

3.2 Real-time test: particle concentration and dispersion

Baseline particle concentrations were very low, with just 0–98 seconds during which particles were detected across 51,043 individual
readings (1/second) (Table S2). It was, therefore, unnecessary to normalize data against the baseline as in other studies. Real-time particle mass concentrations during scaling procedures were also low (Table 2), though there was marked between-subject variation for PM1, PM10 and PM10+ particle sizes (Table S3). PM1 (the smallest detected) and PM10+ (largest) particles were highest in overall concentration (Table 2). PM1 particle concentrations dropped 70% as the distance from patient increased beyond 1.2 m (4 ft.), while PM10 particle concentrations decreased by 50% and PM10+ decreased by 53%. Particles in the intermediate PM2.5 (fine) and PM4 (coarse) size categories were uncommon at all distances, in the frequency of detection and in mass concentration, averaging <0.0001 mg/m$^3$ across participants.

In terms of detection frequency, results showed PM1 (sub-micron) particles were the most common, followed by the largest (PM10+) (Table 2). PM1 particles were detected within 1.2 m (4 ft.) from the patient’s mouth at an average of 144.4 (±122.8) seconds out of the total 5-minute (300 seconds) time interval.
sampled (Table S4). In contrast, PM1 particles were detected only 65 seconds out of the 51,043-second baseline (clinic closure) readings. PM10+ particles were detected at an average of 48 seconds (>31.78) out of 300 seconds within 1.2 m (4 ft.) from the patient. However, they were only detected 14 seconds of the 51,043 seconds of clinic closure. These results show marked particle increases during ultrasonic scaling. As with particle mass concentrations, there is marked variation in detection frequency across subjects (Table S4).

4 | DISCUSSION

4.1 | Dispersion of spatter and droplets produced during ultrasonic scaling

Droplets with diameters between 25 and 50 μm were most prevalent in each zone during the simulation test, followed more distantly by 50–75 μm and 0–25 μm diameter droplets. Detectable droplet sizes for both tests, therefore, meet the criteria for ‘spatter’ (>100 μm in diameter), ‘droplet’ (5–100 μm in diameter) and ‘aerosolized particle,’ (diameters less than 5 μm).7,8 This supports the use of stain profiles on paper as an effective means to study droplet size and dispersion during dental procedures.

Our simulated tests identified quadrants opposite the operator working hand (south and east quadrants) as regions with the highest droplet concentrations, particularly within 0.6m (2 ft.) of the patient (Figure 1). While there was no assistant in these tests, results corroborate those by Veena et al.17 whose pilot study showed contamination on the dental assistant’s chest and left hand during ultrasonic scaling. Assistants typically work opposite the operator in these regions (ie zones with the highest droplet concentrations). The assistant zone contained the highest concentration of settled droplets, consistent with what Veena et al. termed the ‘maximum aerosol contamination’ zone.

The results of both simulated and real-time tests confirm regions proximate to the source have the highest concentration of surface contamination and airborne particle concentrations. This is consistent with other studies showing the greatest contamination within 0.3 m (1 ft.) of the operative site, and that contamination/particle load decreases with increasing distance.17 Veena et al.17 found that contamination decreased by 50% at distances over 0.6m (2 ft.), and Bentley et al.10 found uniform bacterial contamination 0.6m (2 ft.) from the source. Collectively, these conclusions indicate that most particles generated during ultrasonic scaling are found within 0.6m (2 ft.) of the patient’s mouth.

While multiple prior studies show microbe-bearing spatter and aerosols generated during dental treatment often land in proximate regions (eg patient’s chest or provider PPE), recent research shows aerosols generated by ultrasonic scalers can travel up to 3.96m (13 ft.)16 While overall particle concentrations measured in this study were very low (<0.001mg/m³ for most particle sizes), our real-time tests detected particles at distances up to 2.4 m (8 ft.) in all directions and our simulation test detected droplets nearly 1.2m (4 ft.) from the source—the maximum distances for each study. Other studies using bacterial quantification and contamination mapping show viable bacteria spread throughout dental operatory spaces, likely due to transport by aerosols containing irritants and lower levels of patient saliva.5,25 In total, the results of these studies and ours show aerosolized particles produced during ultrasonic scaling decrease as distance from the source increases, but that there is potential for distant contamination by aerosol spread.

4.2 | Contextualizing real-time data

PM1 particles were most prevalent in overall detection frequency. While PM1 particles are unlikely to transport larger bacteria, they can transport smaller virus particles (eg 70-120 nm SARS-CoV-2).26,27 However, their small size and low travel velocity means they may be exhaled before settling in the respiratory tract, though this claim is the subject of ongoing debate due to many extenuating physiological and environmental factors that influence particle movement trajectories.28,29 This is not true of PM2.5 particles, which can enter and settle in deeper parts of the respiratory system where they may absorb into the bloodstream and pose infection risk.30 However, these particles were uncommon in our real-time tests. This may indicate ultrasonic scaling produces comparably less PM2.5 particles, or that they are disproportionately captured by standard saliva ejectors.

Aerosols produced via ultrasonic scaling contain a mixture of irrigation solutions, saliva, blood, bacteria and other respiratory or oropharyngeal debris that can cause surface and PPE contamination or disease transmission via inhalation.4,5,31,32 Our real-time test showed that a 30kHz magnetostrictive ultrasonic unit produced more PM1 particles during dental prophylaxis than any other particle size. Similar results were reported for tooth preparations by Liu et al.,33 wherein 96.78% of total suspended particles were PM1 when no evacuation was used. As a result, the authors conclude that almost all particles generated during drilling and grinding of extracted natural teeth were PM1. Results are similar for in vivo tooth preparations, which primarily produce particles <3.0 μm, but do so at higher concentrations.34 Further investigation into the production of ultrafine particle concentrations during ultrasonic scaling is needed to include smaller, potentially contaminated aerosols, as existing evidence predicts that any PM1-, PM2.5- or PM10-sized particles could transmit COVID-19 and other viruses.34

4.3 | Implications for COVID-era dentistry

The minimum droplet size necessary to transport SARS-CoV-2 is unknown, but coronaviruses range from 70 to 120nm in size.26,27 A recent study of Wuhan Province hospitals during the COVID outbreak showed that out of five size ranges, the highest concentration of SARS-CoV-2 particles was 0.25-1.0μm (submicron) and 2.5μm+...
(fine or supermicron). They propose both likely came from resuspension, the former from contaminated staff clothing and the latter from surface dusts and particulates.14 Insight can also be gleaned from literature on influenza transmission. About 90% of influenza A-laden particles are <4.7 μm.35 Expirated droplets contained detectable influenza RNA in 83% of infected subjects, with 75%+ patients having detectable RNA in all three droplet size ranges evaluated (>4.0 μm, 1.0–4.0 μm and <1.0 μm) and over half of respirable particles containing viral RNA.36 The exhaled breath of influenza patients showed ‘the infectious dose via aerosol [was] about two orders of magnitude lower than via large droplets’ [emphasis added] but that risks associated with larger (>5μm) droplets were strongly mitigated by surgical mask use.37 The size range for influenza A (80–120 nm) largely encompasses that of SARS-CoV-2,37,38 suggesting that under similar conditions, most droplets detected in our simulated and real-time tests were capable of transporting SARS-CoV-2 (with larger droplets/spatter being of greater concern than aerosols for viral transmission).

Altogether, the work by our group and others on droplet and particulate contamination indicate that multiple barriers are necessary to reduce the risk of viral spread during dental procedures. Our prior work shows marked reduction in detectable droplets with high-volume evacuation (HVE) use during ultrasonic scaling for all droplet size ranges, indicating this is a critical tool for removing potentially virus-laden particles at the source.39 This corroborates similar studies that show a reduction in dental handpiece-generated aerosols with the use of HVE or extraroral scavengers.34,40 While HVE was not used in our real-time test, the 99% reduction in particles identified with HVE use during ultrasonic scaling would significantly reduce particle concentration and spread.39 Evacuation devices are, therefore, necessary to protect the health of dental healthcare providers (DHCPs).

Other spatter mitigation strategies include personal protective equipment to limit the risk of inhalation and exposure, and protective barriers to limit potential transmission via contact with contaminated surfaces. Preprocedural mouth rinses, such as chlorhexidine and cetlypyridinium chloride, can reduce bacterial load in dental aerosols by 68.4%.31 Pre-appointment toothbrushing can also reduce airborne contamination during dental procedures.10 The best protocols to protect against viral transmission via aerosols and spatter is likely to be one that uses myriad, multilevel strategies to protect both DHCPs and their patients.

COVID-19 has raised concerns regarding aerosols generated during dental procedures, including the length of time these aerosols remain airborne and the distance they can travel. Our tests identified areas closest to the patient as those with the highest density of small, potentially respirable particles, that this concentration decreases with increased distance, that droplets disproportionately travel in directions opposite the operator working arm, and that all five particle size groups evaluated can be detected up to 2.4m (8 ft.) away from the patient’s mouth during ultrasonic scaling with a saliva ejector. This demonstrates the importance of aerosol and spatter mitigation strategies for all dental procedures, including those associated with dental ultrasonic use.

5 | CLINICAL RELEVANCE

5.1 | Scientific rationale for study

Few studies have used whole room mapping to measure the distance and direction of droplet and aerosol spread from ultrasonic scaling instruments.

5.2 | Principle findings

Concentrations of droplets and spatter produced during ultrasonic scaling decrease at distances further from the source; however, distant surfaces in all directions can become contaminated. Significant contamination was observed opposite the operator, in the dental assistant zone.

5.3 | Practical implications

Due to the maximum potential spread of contaminated droplets and aerosols, dental healthcare professionals must use appropriate personal protective equipment and aerosol mitigating strategies to reduce contact with contaminated aerosols and surfaces.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank Vivian Jauregui, Stella Amaya and several other members of the clinical staff for their help in preparing key elements of this research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

APB and GA had primary responsibility for conceptualization, clinical and simulation data collection, analysis and writing. QH and MD assisted with project development and photoanalytical data collection. DH was involved in project development and data collection. BS and JCM were responsible for supervision, resources, conceptualization and manuscript review. GMM assisted with project execution.

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**Supporting Information**

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

**How to cite this article:** Pierre-Bez AC, Agostini-Walesch GM, Bradford Smith P, et al. Ultrasonic scaling in COVID-era dentistry: A quantitative assessment of aerosol spread during simulated and clinical ultrasonic scaling procedures. Int J Dent Hygiene. 2021;19:474–480. https://doi.org/10.1111/idh.12548