

Skeletal muscle physiology for medical students

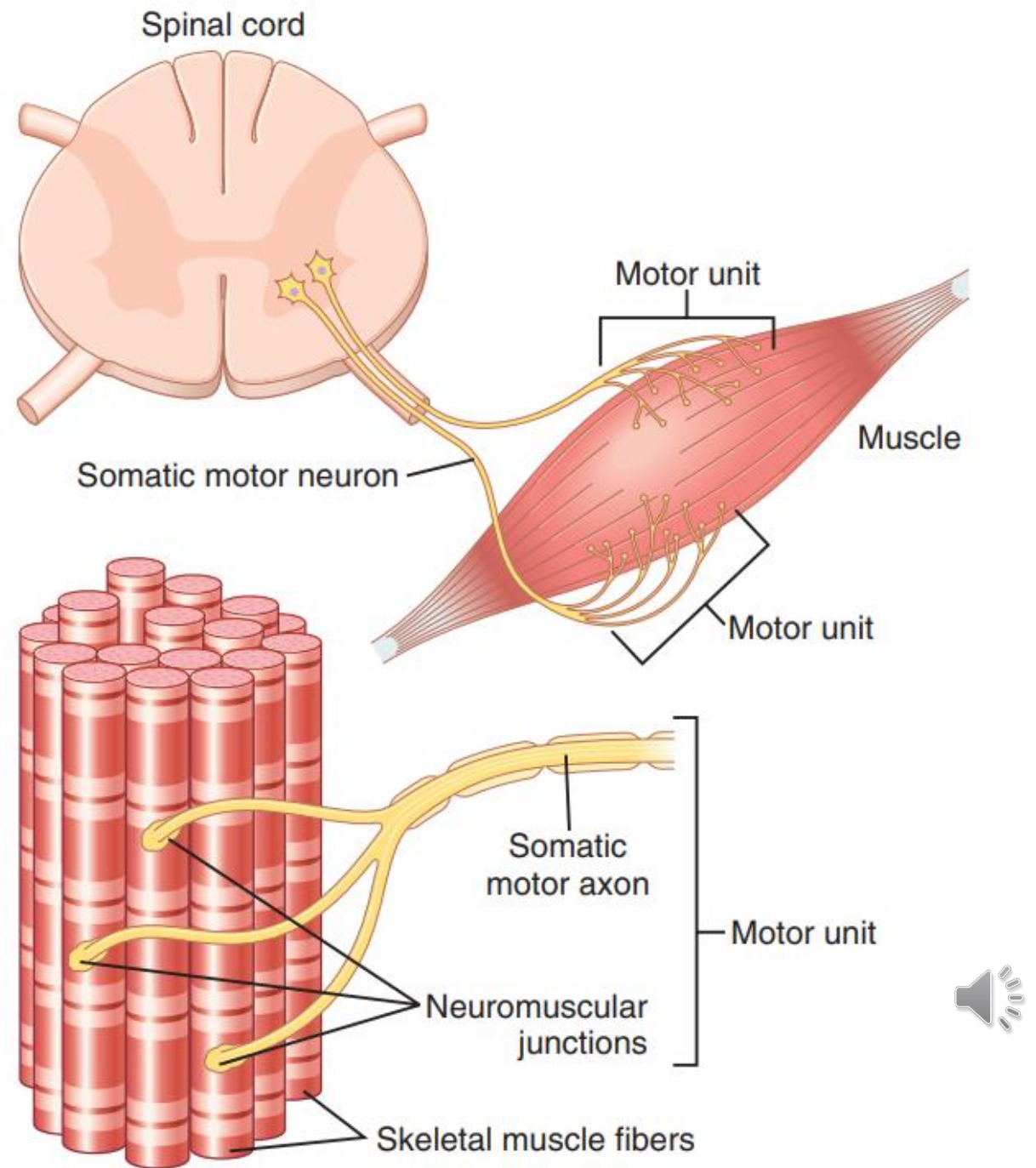
Skeletal Muscle Mechanics

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Motor unit



Motor unit

- Each lower motor neuron (motoneuron) innervates multiple muscle fibers, with the number of fibers innervated depending on the type of muscle.
- All the muscle fibers innervated by a single nerve fiber are called a **motor unit**.



Motor unit

- Smaller muscles that react rapidly and whose control must be exact have more nerve fibers for fewer muscle fibers (for instance, as few as two or three muscle fibers per motor unit in some of the laryngeal muscles).
- Large muscles that do not require fine control, such as the soleus muscle, may have several hundred muscle fibers in a motor unit.



Motor unit


- The muscle fibers in each motor unit are not all bunched together in the muscle but overlap other motor units in microbundles of 3 to 15 fibers.
- This interdigitation allows the separate motor units to contract in support of one another rather than entirely as individual segments.



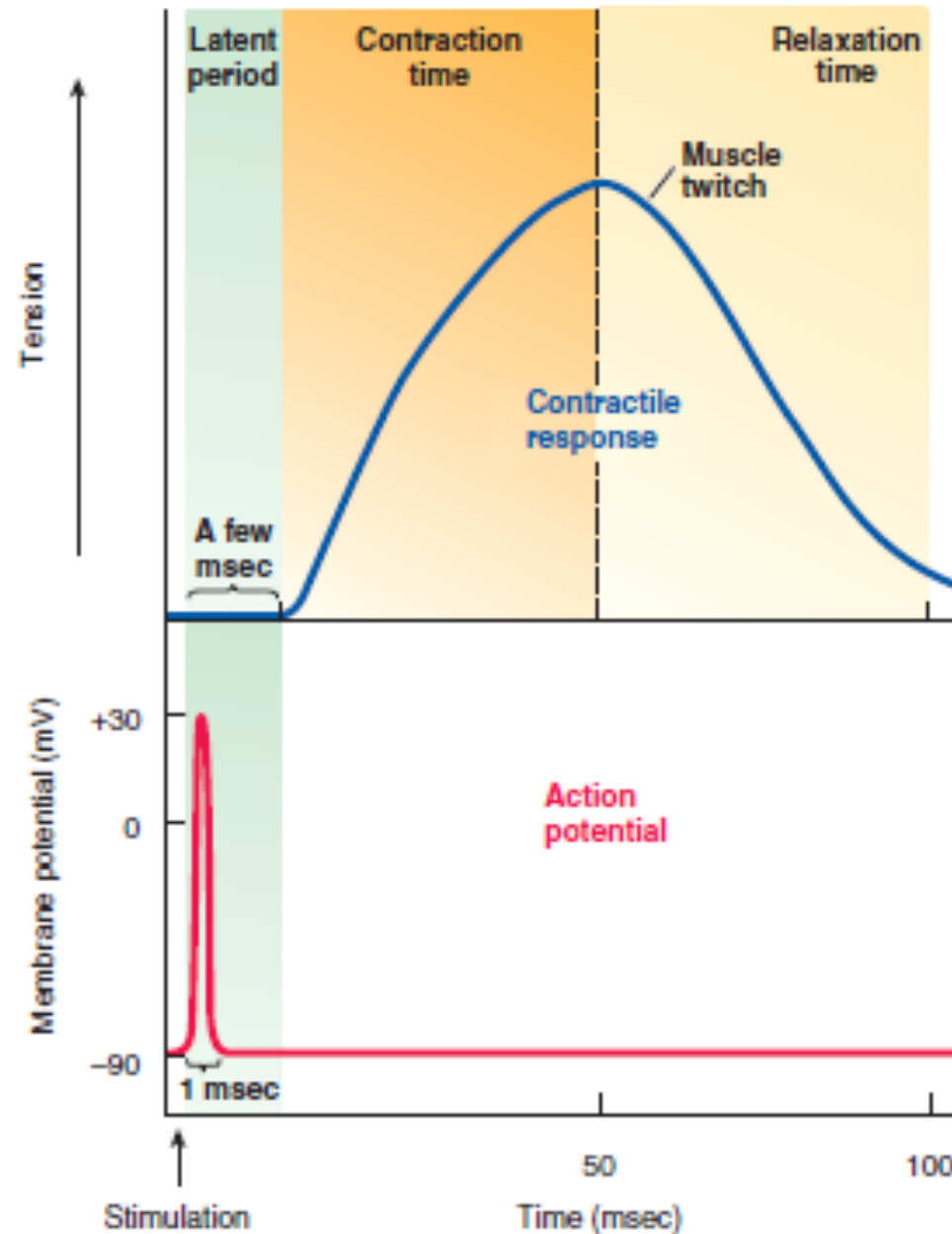
Motor unit recruitment

- The process in which the number of active motor units increases is called **motor unit recruitment**.
- Typically, the different motor units of an entire muscle are not stimulated to contract in unison. While some motor units are contracting, others are relaxed.
- This pattern of motor unit activity delays muscle fatigue and allows contraction of a whole muscle to be sustained for long periods.
- Recruitment is one factor responsible for producing smooth movements rather than a series of jerks.

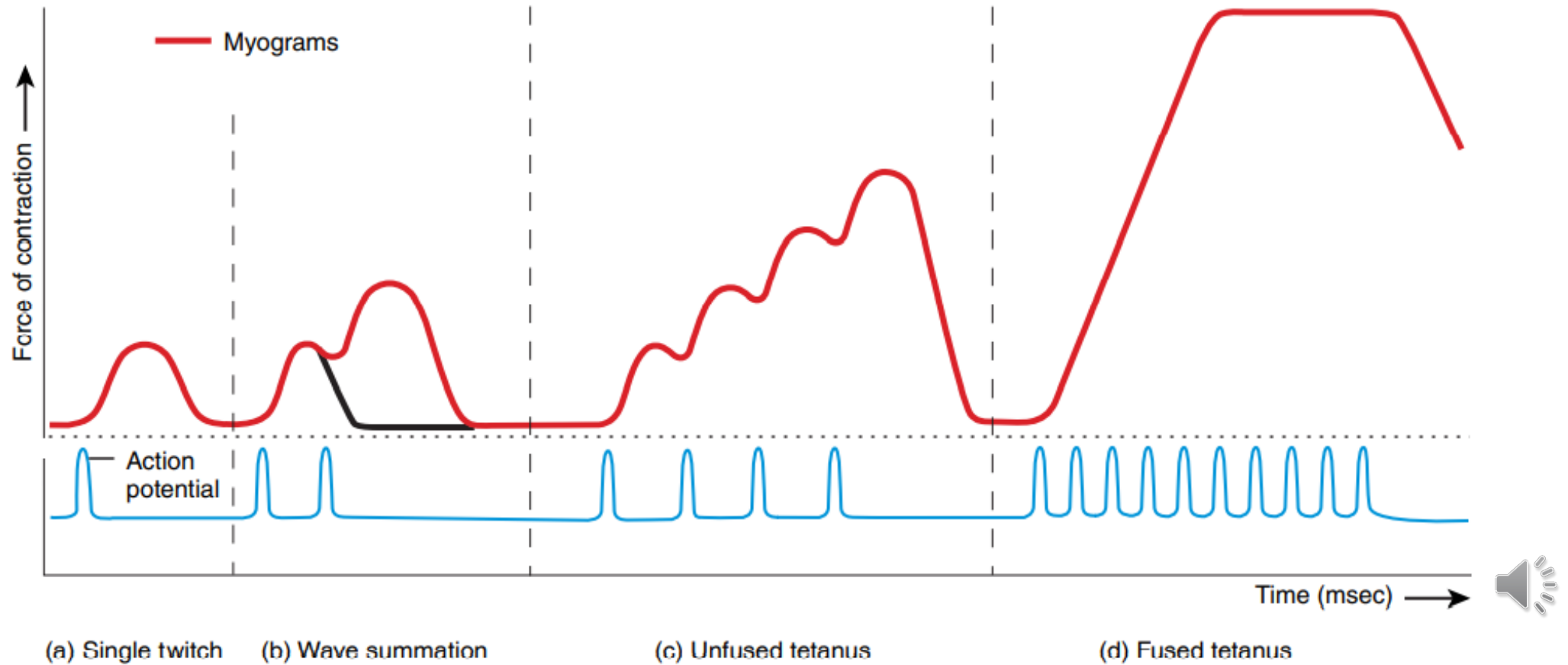
Motor unit recruitment

- The number of muscle fibers innervated by one motor neuron varies greatly. Precise movements are brought about by small changes in muscle contraction.
- Therefore, the small muscles that produce precise movements are made up of small motor units.
- By contrast, large motor units are active when a large amount of tension is needed and precision is less important. 

Twitch Contraction



Physiology lab



- **Muscular tissue has four special properties** that enable it to function and contribute to homeostasis:
- **1. Electrical excitability**, a property of both muscle and nerve cells, is the ability to respond to certain stimuli by producing electrical signals called action potentials (impulses).



- **2. Contractility** is the ability of muscular tissue to contract forcefully when stimulated by an action potential. When a skeletal muscle contracts, it generates tension (force of contraction) while pulling on its attachment points. If the tension generated is great enough to overcome the resistance of the object to be moved, the muscle shortens and movement occurs.

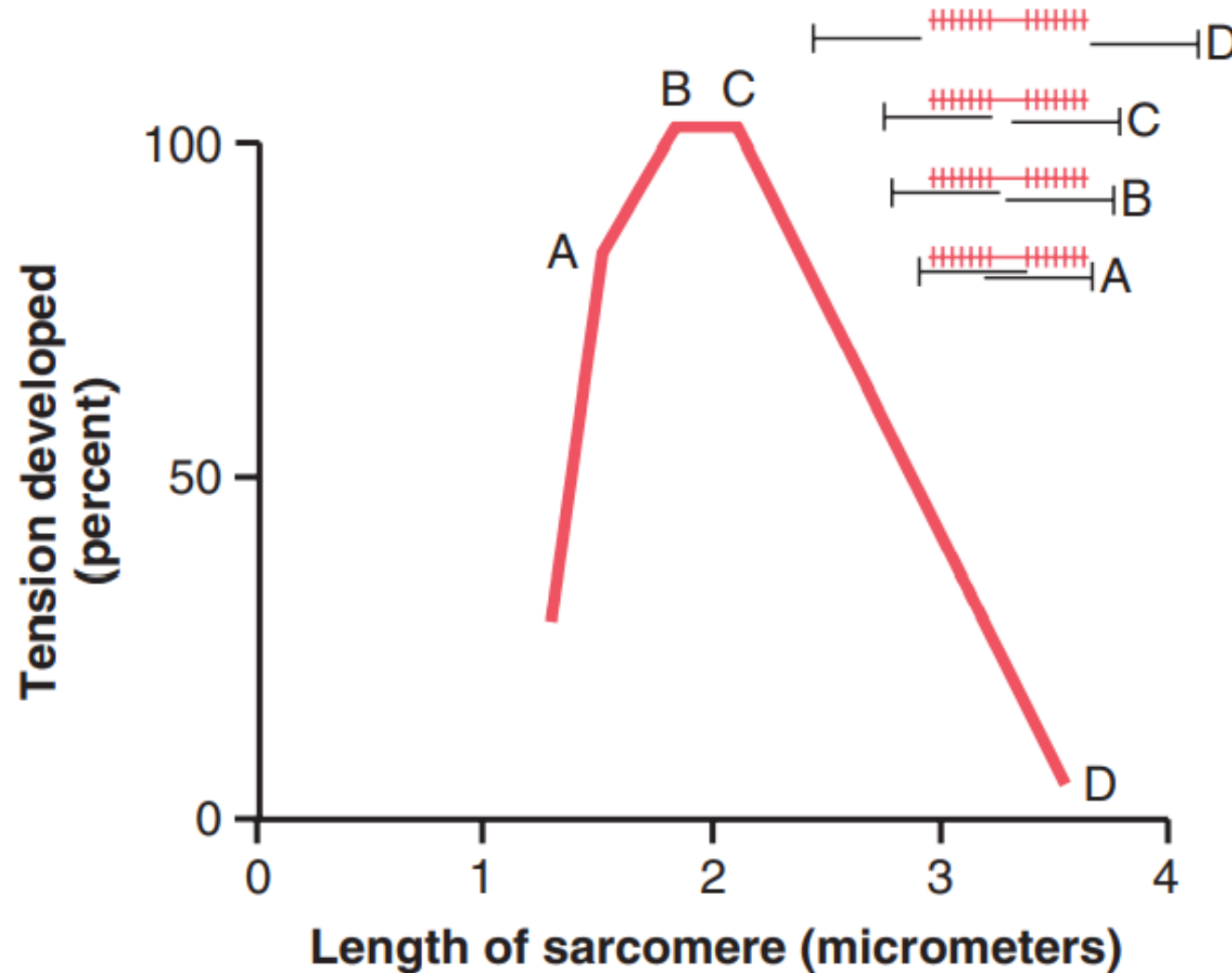


- **3. Extensibility** is the ability of muscular tissue to stretch, within limits, without being damaged. The connective tissue within the muscle limits the range of extensibility and keeps it within the contractile range of the muscle cells. Normally, smooth muscle is subject to the greatest amount of stretching.
- **4. Elasticity** is the ability of muscular tissue to return to its original length and shape after contraction or extension.



Length-tension relationship

The amount of actin and myosin filament overlap determines tension developed by the contracting muscle.



- At point D on the diagram, the actin filament has pulled all the way out to the end of the myosin filament, with no actin-myosin overlap. At this point, the tension developed by the activated muscle is zero.




- The sarcomere shortens and the actin filament begins to overlap the myosin filament, the tension increases progressively until the sarcomere length decreases to about 2.2 micrometers.
- At point D, the actin filament has already overlapped all the cross-bridges of the myosin filament but has not yet reached the center of the myosin filament.

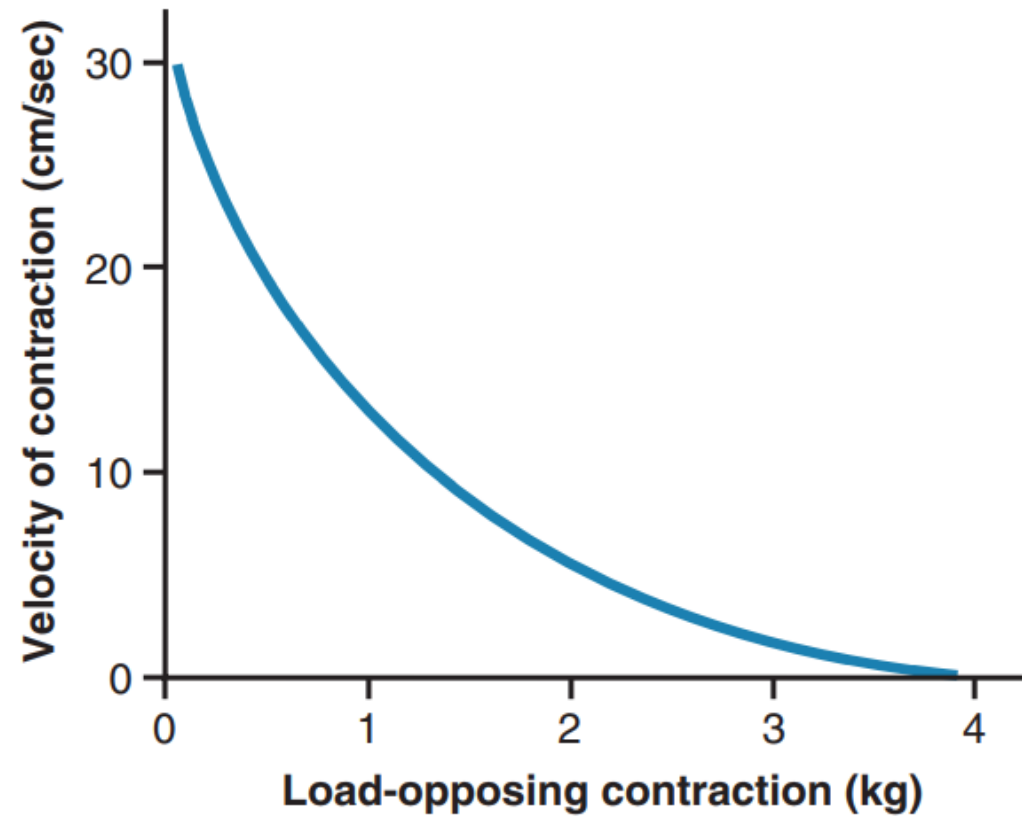


- With further shortening, the sarcomere maintains full tension until point B is reached, at a sarcomere length of about 2 micrometers. At this point, the ends of the two actin filaments begin to overlap each other in addition to overlapping the myosin filaments.



- As the sarcomere length decreases from 2 micrometers down to about 1.65 micrometers, at point A, the strength of contraction decreases rapidly. At this point, the two Z disks of the sarcomere abut the ends of the myosin filaments.
- Then, as contraction proceeds to still shorter sarcomere lengths, the ends of the myosin filaments are crumpled and the strength of contraction approaches zero, but the sarcomere has now contracted to its shortest length. 

Contraction velocity- load



Contraction velocity- load

- A skeletal muscle contracts rapidly when it contracts against no load.
- When loads are applied, the velocity of contraction becomes progressively less as the load increases.
- When the load has been increased to equal the maximum force that the muscle can exert, the velocity of contraction becomes zero and no contraction results, despite activation of the muscle fiber.



Contraction velocity- load

- This decreasing velocity of contraction with load is caused by the fact that a load on a contracting muscle is a reverse force that opposes the contractile force caused by muscle contraction.
- Therefore, the net force that is available to cause velocity of shortening is correspondingly reduced.




Muscle tone

- Even when muscles are at rest, a certain amount of tension usually remains, which is called muscle tone.
- Because normal skeletal muscle fibers do not contract without an action potential to stimulate the fibers, skeletal muscle tone results entirely from a low rate of nerve impulses coming from the spinal cord.
- These nerve impulses, in turn, are controlled partly by signals transmitted from the brain to the appropriate spinal cord anterior motoneurons and partly by signals that originate in muscle spindles located in the muscle itself.



Muscle tone

- When the motor neurons serving a skeletal muscle are damaged or cut, the muscle becomes flaccid, a state of limpness in which muscle tone is lost.
- To sustain muscle tone, small groups of motor units are alternatively active and inactive in a constantly shifting pattern.
- Muscle tone keeps skeletal muscles firm, but it does not result in a force strong enough to produce movement. 

Muscle tone

- Muscle tone also is important in smooth muscle tissues, such as those found in the gastrointestinal tract, where the walls of the digestive organs maintain a steady pressure on their contents.
- The tone of smooth muscle fibers in the walls of blood vessels plays a crucial role in maintaining blood pressure




Clinical connection: muscle tone examination

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Hypotonia

- Hypotonia refers to decreased or lost muscle tone. Such muscles are said to be flaccid.
- Flaccid muscles are loose and appear flattened rather than rounded. Certain disorders of the nervous system and disruptions in the balance of electrolytes (especially sodium, calcium, and, to a lesser extent, magnesium) may result in flaccid paralysis which is characterized by loss of muscle tone, loss or reduction of tendon reflexes, and atrophy (wasting away) and degeneration of muscles. 

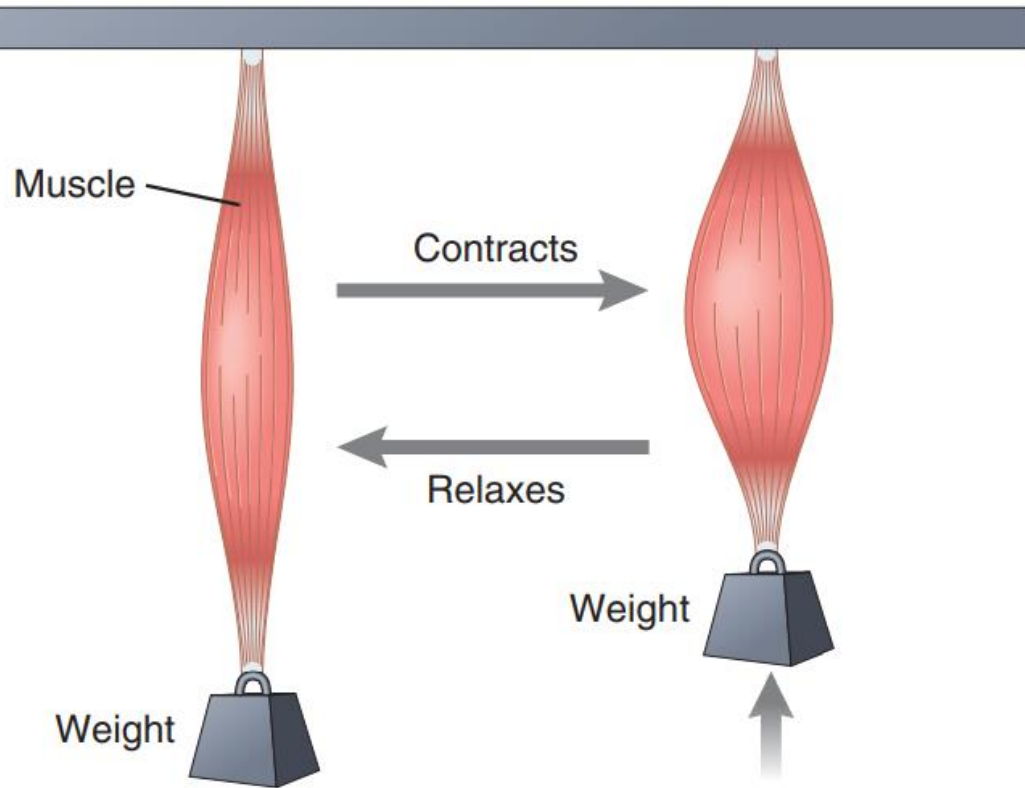
Hypertonia

- Hypertonia refers to increased muscle tone and is expressed in two ways:
- **Spasticity** is characterized by increased muscle tone (stiffness) associated with an increase in tendon reflexes and pathological reflexes.
- **Rigidity** refers to increased muscle tone in which reflexes are not affected.

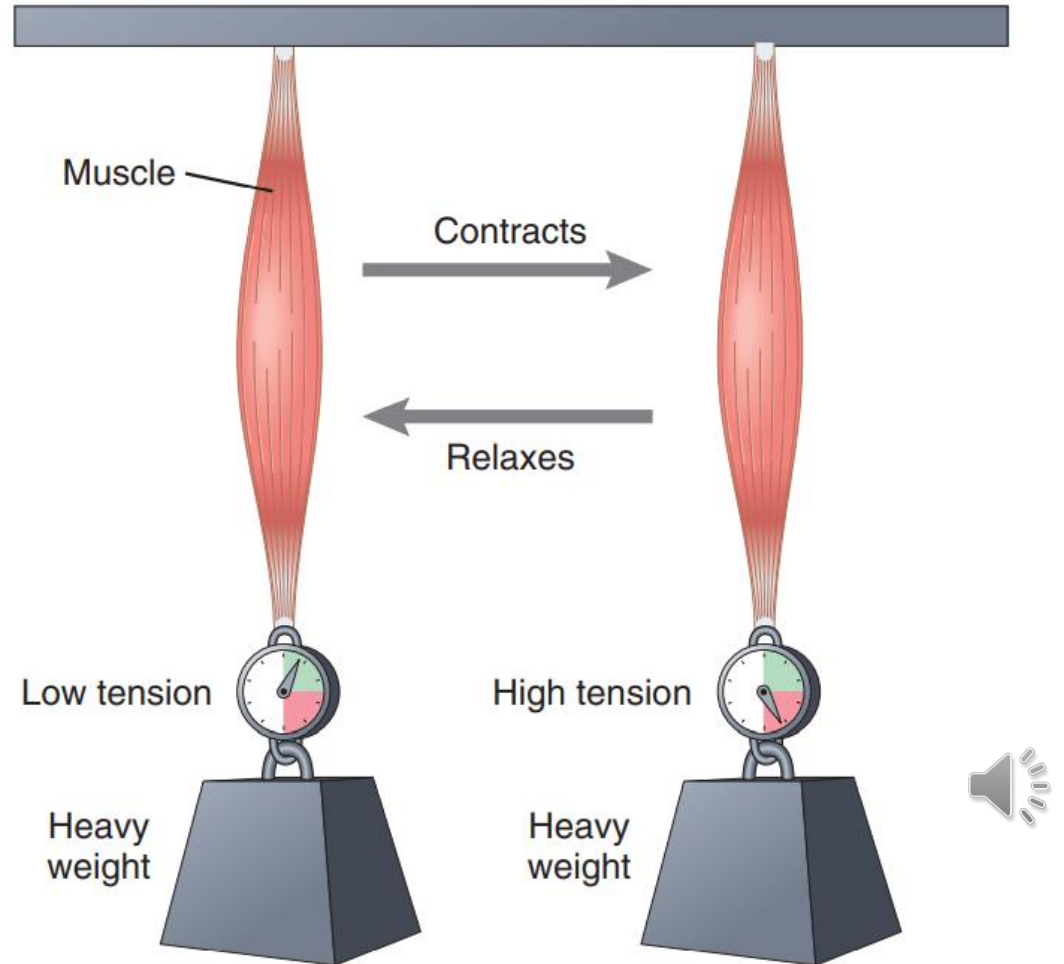


Isometric vs isotonic contraction

Isotonic contraction



Isometric contraction



Isometric vs isotonic contraction

- Muscle contraction is said to be isometric when the muscle does not shorten during contraction,
- Isotonic when it does shorten but the tension on the muscle remains constant throughout the contraction.



Isotonic contraction

- Isotonic contractions are used for body movements and for moving objects. The two types of isotonic contractions are **concentric and eccentric**.
- If the tension generated in a concentric isotonic contraction is great enough to overcome the resistance of the object to be moved, the muscle shortens and pulls on another structure, such as a tendon, to produce movement and to reduce the angle at a joint.
- Picking up a book from a table involves concentric isotonic contractions of the biceps brachii muscle in the arm.



Isometric contraction

- In an isometric contraction, the tension generated is not enough to exceed the resistance of the object to be moved, and the muscle does not change its length.
- An example would be holding a book steady using an outstretched arm. These contractions are important for maintaining posture and for supporting objects in a fixed position.
- Although isometric contractions do not result in body movement, energy is still expended.
- The book pulls the arm downward, stretching the shoulder and arm muscles. The isometric contraction of the shoulder and arm muscles counteracts the stretch.
- Isometric contractions are important because they stabilize some joints as others are moved.
- Most activities include both isotonic and isometric contraction.




Isometric vs isotonic contraction

- Isotonic contraction occurs when the force of the muscle contraction is greater than the load and the tension on the muscle remains constant during the contraction; when the muscle contracts, it shortens and moves the load.
- Isometric contraction occurs when the load is greater than the force of the muscle contraction; the muscle creates tension when it contracts, but the overall length of the muscle does not change.



Muscle fatigue

- Prolonged and strong contraction of a muscle leads to the well-known state of muscle fatigue.
- Studies have shown that muscle fatigue increases in almost direct proportion to the rate of depletion of muscle glycogen.
- Fatigue results mainly from **inability of the contractile and metabolic processes of the muscle fibers to continue supplying the same work output.**
- **Interruption of blood flow** through a contracting muscle leads to almost complete muscle fatigue within 1 or 2 minutes because of the loss of nutrient supply, especially the loss of oxygen 

Fatigue of NMJ

- Stimulation of the nerve fiber at rates greater than 100 times per second for several minutes often diminishes the number of acetylcholine vesicles so much that impulses fail to pass into the muscle fiber.
- This situation is called **fatigue of the neuromuscular junction**.



CNS fatigue

- Originates from the central nervous system and affects the neural drive to muscles leading to generalized tiredness and decreased overall performance.



Remodeling of muscle to match function

- All the muscles of the body are continually being remodeled to match the functions that are required of them.
- Their diameters, lengths, strengths, and vascular supplies are altered, and even the types of muscle fibers are altered at least slightly.



Muscle hypertrophy

- The increase of the total mass of a muscle is called muscle hypertrophy.
- Virtually all muscle hypertrophy results from an increase in the number of actin and myosin filaments in each muscle fiber, causing enlargement of the individual muscle fibers; this condition is called simply fiber **hypertrophy**.



Muscle hypertrophy

- Along with the increasing size of myofibrils, the enzyme systems that provide energy also increase. This increase is especially true of the enzymes for glycolysis, allowing rapid supply of energy during short-term forceful muscle contraction.



- **Adjustment of Muscle Length.** Another type of hypertrophy occurs when muscles are stretched to greater than normal length.
- This stretching causes new sarcomeres to be added at the ends of the muscle fibers, where they attach to the tendons.



Muscle atrophy

- When a muscle remains unused for many weeks, the rate of degradation of the contractile proteins is more rapid than the rate of replacement. Therefore, muscle **atrophy** occurs (a decrease in total mass).
- The pathway that appears to account for much of the protein degradation in a muscle undergoing atrophy is the ATP-dependent ubiquitin-proteasome pathway.



Clinical connection



- **Muscle Denervation** Causes Rapid Atrophy.
- When a muscle loses its nerve supply, it no longer receives the contractile signals that are required to maintain normal muscle size. Therefore, atrophy begins almost immediately.
- After about 2 months, degenerative changes also begin to appear in the muscle fibers.



Thank You!

