Film thickness (μ) has a direct effect on the retention and elution temperature for each sample component. Extremely volatile compounds should be analyzed on thick-film columns to increase the time the compounds spend in the stationary phase, allowing them to separate. High molecular weight compounds must be analyzed on thinner film columns. This reduces the length of time the analytes stay in the column, and minimizes bleed at required higher elution temperatures. Film thickness also affects the amount of material that can be injected onto the column without overloading. A thicker film column can be used for higher concentration samples, such as purity analysis.

Film thickness directly affects phase ratio (β), which is an important consideration when changing internal diameter. When internal diameter increases, film thickness (df) must increase in order to provide similar resolution and retention. Table III shows values for common dimensions of columns. Similar values indicate similar elution for different IDs.

Table III Phase ratio (β) values for common column dimensions.*

	Film Thickness (df) / β Value						
Column ID	0.10μm	0.25μm	0.50μm	1.0μm	1.5μm	3.0μm	5.0μm
0.18mm	450	180	90	45	30	15	9
0.25mm	625	250	125	63	42	21	13
0.32mm	800	320	160	80	53	27	16
0.53mm	1325	530	265	128	88	43	27

*β = r/2df (r=internal radius of tubing; df = phase film thickness)

Efficiency, N

Column efficiency (N) is the column length divided by the height equivalent to a theoretical plate (HETP). The effective theoretical plates are affected by how well the phase has been coated onto the column walls and is measured by how narrow the peaks are when they are eluted at the end of the column. Therefore, the higher the column efficiency (N), the better resolution power the column will have.

Capillary columns are made in various lengths, typically in standard lengths of 10, 15, 30, 60, and 105 meters. Longer columns provide more resolving power, but increase analysis time. Doubling the column length increases resolution by approximately 41% (note: the column length is under the square root function). However, under isothermal conditions, it will double analysis time. In temperature-programmed analyses, retention times are more dependent on temperature than column length, with a marginal increase (approx. 10-20%) in analysis time upon doubling the column length.

Conclusion

A basic understanding of the resolution equation allows analysts to make more effective column choices. Phase choice is influenced primarily by selectivity, which can be approximated by considering phase and analyte structures, as well as by referencing retention indices or existing applications. Column retention (capacity) and efficiency also affect separations and should influence decisions on column internal diameter, film thickness, and length. By considering these factors, analysts can simplify the column selection process and increase lab productivity by optimizing separations.