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How Mars atmosphere got so thin, reveals study

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Scientists have developed a 'smart knife' that can tell surgeons immediately whether the tissue they are cutting is cancerous or not. New findings from NASA's Curiosity rover provide clues to how Mars lost its original atmosphere, which scientists believe was much thicker than the one left today.

"The beauty of these measurements lies in the fact that these are the first really high precision measurements of the composition of Mars' atmosphere," said Sushil Atreya, a professor of atmospheric, oceanic and space science at the University of Michigan who is a co-author of two related papers published in the July 19 issue of Science. Atreya is a co-investigator on Curiosity's Sample Analysis at Mars (SAM) suite of instruments, considered the rover's cornerstone lab.

SAM measured the abundances of different gases and isotopes in samples of Martian air, according to a NASA press release. Isotopes are variations of the same chemical element that contain different numbers of neutrons, such as the most common carbon isotope, carbon-12, and a heavier stable isotope, carbon-13.

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