

17.2: The Discovery of Radioactivity

Learning Objectives

- List the most common emissions from naturally radioactive nuclei.
- Compare the energy released per gram of matter in nuclear reactions to that in chemical reactions.
- Express the relationship between nuclear stability and the nuclei's binding energy per nucleon ratio.

No one could have known in the 1800's that the discovery of the fascinating science and art form of photography would eventually lead to the splitting of the atom. The basis of photography is the fact that visible light causes certain chemical reactions. If the chemicals are spread thinly on a surface but protected from light by a covering, no reaction occurs. When the covering is removed, however, light acting on the chemicals causes them to darken. With millions of cameras in use today, we do not think of it as a strange phenomenon—but at the time of its discovery, photography was a strange and wonderful thing.

Even stranger was the discovery by Wilhelm Roentgen—that radiation other than visible light could expose photographic film. He found that film wrapped in dark paper would react when x-rays went through the paper and struck the film.

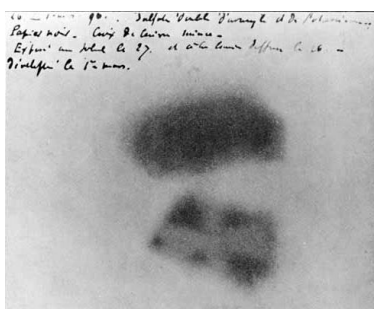


Figure 17.2.1: Image of Becquerel's photographic plate, which has been fogged by exposure to radiation from a uranium salt. The shadow of a metal Maltese Cross placed between the plate and the uranium salt is clearly visible (Public Domain).

When Henri Becquerel heard about Roentgen's discovery, he wondered if his fluorescent minerals would give the same x-rays. Becquerel placed some of his rock crystals on top of a well-covered photographic plate and sat them in the sunlight. The sunlight made the crystals glow with a bright fluorescent light, but when Becquerel developed the film he was very disappointed. He found that only one of his minerals, a uranium salt, had fogged the photographic plate. He decided to try again, and this time, to leave them out in the sun for a longer period of time. Fortunately, the weather didn't cooperate, and Becquerel had to leave the crystals and film stored in a drawer for several cloudy days. Before continuing his experiments, Becquerel decided to check one of the photographic plates to make sure the chemicals were still good. To his amazement, he found that the plate had been exposed in spots where it had been near the uranium containing rocks, and some of these rocks had not been exposed to sunlight at all. In later experiments, Becquerel confirmed that the radiation from the uranium had no connection with light or fluorescence, but the amount of radiation was directly proportional to the concentration of uranium in the rock. Becquerel had discovered **radioactivity**.

The Curies and Radium

One of Becquerel's assistants, a young Polish scientist named Maria Skłodowska (to become Marie Curie after she married Pierre Curie), became interested in the phenomenon of radioactivity. With her husband, she decided to find out if chemicals other than uranium were radioactive. The Austrian government was happy to send the Curies a ton of pitchblende from the mining region of Joachimsthal, because it was waste material that had to be disposed of anyway. The Curies wanted the pitchblende because it was the residue of uranium mining. From the ton of pitchblende, the Curies separated 0.10 g of a previously unknown element, radium, in the form of the compound radium chloride. This radium was many times more radioactive than **uranium**.

By 1902, the world was aware of a new phenomenon called radioactivity and of new elements which exhibited natural radioactivity. For this work, Becquerel and the Curies shared the 1903 Nobel Prize and for subsequent work; Marie Curie received a second Nobel Prize in 1911. She is the only person ever to receive two Nobel Prizes in science.

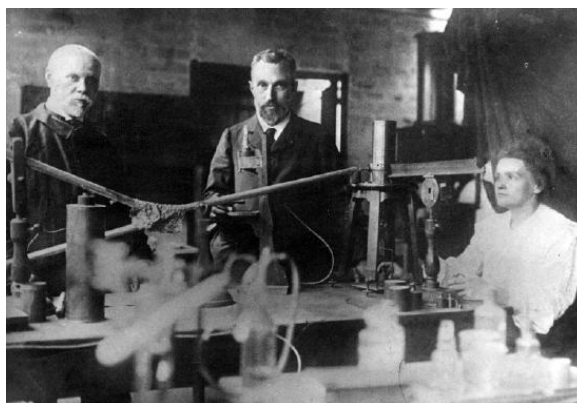


Figure 17.2.2: Marie Curie (right) and Pierre Curie (middle) with Henri Becquerel (left) shared the 1903 Nobel Prize.

Further experiments provided information about the characteristics of the penetrating emissions from radioactive substances. It was soon discovered that there were three common types of radioactive emissions. Some of the radiation could pass easily through aluminum foil while some of the radiation was stopped by the foil. Some of the radiation could even pass through foil up to a centimeter thick. The three basic types of radiation were named alpha, beta, and gamma radiation. The actual composition of the three types of radiation was still not known.

Eventually, scientists were able to demonstrate experimentally that the alpha particle, α , was a helium nucleus (a particle containing two protons and two neutrons), a beta particle, β , was a high speed electron, and gamma rays, γ , were a very high energy form of light (even higher energy than x-rays).

Unstable Nuclei May Disintegrate

A nucleus (with one exception, hydrogen-1) consists of some number of protons and neutrons pulled together in an extremely tiny volume. Since protons are positively charged and like charges repel, it is clear that protons cannot remain together in the nucleus unless there is a powerful force holding them there. The force which holds the nucleus together is generated by **nuclear binding energy**.

A nucleus with a large amount of binding energy per nucleon (proton or neutron) will be held together tightly and is referred to as stable. These nuclei do not break apart. When there is too little binding energy per nucleon, the nucleus will be less stable and may disintegrate (come apart). Such disintegration is referred to as **natural radioactivity**. It is also possible for scientists to smash nuclear particles together and cause nuclear reactions between normally stable nuclei. This disintegration is referred to as **artificial radioactivity**. None of the elements above #92 on the periodic table occur on earth naturally—they are all products of artificial (manmade) radioactivity.

When nuclei come apart, they come apart violently accompanied by a tremendous release of energy in the form of heat, light, and radiation. This energy comes from some of the nuclear binding energy. In nuclear changes, the energy involved comes from the nuclear binding energy. However, in chemical reactions, the energy comes from electrons moving energy levels. A typical nuclear change (such as fission) may involve millions of times more energy per atom changing compared to a chemical change (such as burning)!

Summary

- Henri Becquerel, Marie Curie, and Pierre Curie shared the discovery of radioactivity.

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