

Radioactivity

PHYS 1301 F98

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Introduction

This lab will simulate the behavior of a radioactive material, such as a clump of carbon-14 nuclei. Radioactivity is the spontaneous decay or transformation of a nucleus containing some number of protons into another nucleus containing a different number of protons. The number of protons may either increase or decrease. This process is spontaneous in the sense that you don't have to do anything to the radioactive nucleus in order for this transformation to occur. You do not have to shine light on the nucleus, heat it, hit it, apply pressure to it or anything else. As a result of this transformation, particles are emitted from the nucleus. These particles are either electrons, anti-electrons (called positrons), helium nuclei (called alpha particles) and photons of high energy (so-called gamma rays). These photons have too high an energy, and hence too small a wavelength, for your eye to detect them.

Radioactivity is surprisingly common in nature. For example, carbon-14, an isotope of carbon whose nuclei contain 6 protons and 8 neutrons versus the 6 protons and 6 neutrons of the more common carbon-12 isotope, occurs in nature at a relative concentration of about 1 part in a billion compared to that of carbon-12. Although this may sound like a miniscule abundance, carbon-14 is a practical tool for dating the age of many formerly living objects.

It is also the case that at least one common household device relies on radioactivity for its operation. Most smoke detectors in houses, apartments and schools have a quantity of the radioactive element *Americium* in them. The nuclei in a particular isotope of this element (so-called Americium-241) undergo radioactive decay and emit helium nuclei in the process. These helium nuclei ionize the surrounding air and the positively and negatively charged ions drift towards oppositely charged electrodes of the smoke detector and produce an electrical current. When this electrical current is stopped or reduced because of the presence of smoke between the electrodes of the smoke detector, the smoke detector's electronic circuitry sounds an obnoxious buzzer you sometimes hear.

The rate at which radioactive nuclei decay is often summarized by the notion of its "half-life." A half-life is the amount of time it takes for one-half of an arbitrary amount of radioactive material to radioactively decay. The half-life of a given radioactive material is constant, although the exact time at which a particular radioactive nucleus will decay is random. (An event is said to be random when you cannot predict it.) Although this seems weird, there is no contradiction here. The notion of a half-life is a probabilistic one and applies to the behavior of a large collection of radioactive nuclei. Strictly speaking, you cannot meaningfully speak of the half-life of a single radioactive nucleus because when the decays, all of it decays

and not just half of it. This probabilistic nature of radioactivity makes it a uniquely quantum mechanical phenomenon.

Procedure

1. Locate the folder *PEARLS*. The instructor will help you if you can't find it. Double click (left mouse button) on it. Inside, locate the folder *Modern Physics*, click on it and continue until you have launched the *RADIOACTIVITY* module.
2. You first need to understand the display. Click *GO* and watch the display. The radioactive nuclei will change color when they have decayed. The program will automatically keep track of the number of *remaining* radioactive nuclei and the elapsed time. Make sure you can find these numbers See the instructor if you cannot.
3. Set the initial population of radioactive nuclei to 500. Set the initial half-life to 10 seconds. Set the time zoom to the value 1.
4. **Question 1.** I want you to fill out Table 1. You will start and stop the display in 2 second intervals, recording the number of *surviving* nuclei at the end of each interval N . You do not need to stop at exactly 2 second intervals, just come as close as you can. You might want to practice a bit before you start for real. Continue recording numbers until the elapsed time equals 36 seconds or so.
Question 2. Plot the number of surviving nuclei versus time. (Yes, this means you need to find some graph paper.) Do your data points fall on a straight line? Do they fall on a curve?
5. Again set the initial population of radioactive nuclei to 500. Set the half-life to 2 seconds. Set the time zoom to 0.1. This will slow down the apparent rate at which the nuclei will decay, allowing you to more easily record numbers.
6. **Question 3.** I want you now to fill out Table 2. To do this, you will need to start and stop the display in consecutive 2 second intervals. This means you will start the simulation and record the number of radioactive nuclei at the start of the interval N_0 , and then stop the simulation after 2 seconds have elapsed. You will then record the number of surviving radioactive nuclei N . This number of surviving nuclei will then become the *starting* number of nuclei for the next 2 second interval, and so on. **Question 4.** What is your average value for N/N_0 ? Be careful to exclude from your average fractions where $N=0$. Is your average consistent with the half-life you had programmed the simulation with? Is your average *exactly* equal to the half-life you programmed the simulation with? What do you make of this?
7. Again set the initial population of radioactive nuclei to 500. Set the half-life to 10 seconds. Set the time zoom to 1.0.

8. **Question 5.** I want you to fill out Table 3. For each of the initial populations in the table, I want you to run the simulation for just 1 second and then record the number of surviving nuclei N . Fill out the last column as well. This last column is the number of nuclei that decayed in 1 second and is a kind of average of the *activity* of the radioactive substance or the total number of radioactive decays per second. The activity is not a property of a particular radioactive nucleus. **Question 6.** Plot the number of decayed nuclei versus the starting population N_0 . (If $N=0$ you can stop collecting data.) Draw a smooth curve through these data points. (Smooth means smooth. The curve should not look like the stock market report.) **Question 7.** Can you form a conclusion about the activity of a radioactive substance and the size of the starting population?

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Name _____ Section _____

Abstract:

Questions

Question 2:

Question 4:

Question 7:

Table 1.

Time(sec)	N
0-2	
2-4	
6-8	
8-10	
10-12	
12-14	
14-16	
16-18	
18-20	
20-22	
22-24	
24-26	
26-28	
28-30	
30-32	
32-34	
34-36	

Table 2.

Time (sec)	N_0	N	$\left(\frac{N}{N_0}\right)$
0-2			
2-4			
4-6			
6-8			
8-10			
10-12			
12-14			
14-16			

Table 3.

N_0	N	$N_0 - N$
500		
400		
300		
200		
150		
100		
50		

Conclusion