

α , β , and γ

Nuclear radiation can be broadly classified into three categories. These three categories are labeled with the first three letters of the Greek alphabet: α (alpha), β (beta) and γ (gamma). Alpha radiation consists of a stream of fast-moving helium nuclei (two protons and two neutrons). As such, an alpha particle is relatively heavy and carries two positive electrical charges. Beta radiation consists of fast-moving electrons or positrons (an antimatter electron). A beta particle is much lighter than an alpha, and carries one unit of charge. Gamma radiation consists of photons, which are massless and carry no charge. X-rays are also photons, but carry less energy than gammas.

After being emitted from a decaying nucleus, the alpha, beta or gamma radiation may pass through matter, or it may be absorbed by the matter. You will arrange for the three classes of radiation to pass through nothing but a thin layer of air, a sheet of paper, and an aluminum sheet. Will the different types of radiation be absorbed differently by the air, paper and aluminum? The question can be answered by considering which radiation type will interact more strongly with matter, and then tested by experiment.

In this experiment you will use small sources of alpha, beta, and gamma radiation. *Follow all local procedures for handling radioactive materials.*

OBJECTIVES

- Develop a model for the relative absorption of alpha, beta, and gamma radiation by matter.
- Use a radiation counter to measure the absorption of alpha, beta, and gamma radiation by air, paper, and aluminum.
- Analyze count rate data to test for consistency with your model.

MATERIALS

computer
Vernier computer interface
Logger *Pro*
Radiation Monitor
paper sheet

Polonium-210 0.1 μ C alpha source
Strontium-90 0.1 μ C beta source
Cobalt-60 1 μ C gamma source
aluminum sheet, about 2 mm thick

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Most nuclear radiation carries energy in the range of a few million electron volts, or MeV (1 MeV = 10^6 eV = 1.6×10^{-13} J), regardless of its type (alpha, beta, or gamma). This means that more massive particles generally travel more slowly than light particles. Make a preliminary guess as to which radiation type will in general interact most strongly with matter, and therefore would be most strongly absorbed as it passes through matter. Consider electrical charge, mass and speed. Explain your reasons.
2. Which radiation type do you predict would interact, in general, least strongly with matter, and so be less absorbed than others? Why?

3. Which radiation type do you predict would have an intermediate level of interaction with matter? Why?
4. You will be using paper and aluminum sheet metal as absorbers for the radiation. Which material has the greatest areal density (that is, a density measure in mass per unit area, which could be measured in g/cm^2), and so would present more matter to the passing radiation? Which material would have less?
5. Is your radiation monitor sensitive to all three types of radiation? How can you tell? Devise a test and carry it out. If your radiation monitor does not detect one form of radiation, then you will be able to compare the absorption of the remaining two types.

PROCEDURE

1. Connect the radiation monitor to DIG/SONIC 1 of the computer interface.
2. Prepare the computer for data collection by opening the file “01 Alpha Beta Gamma” from the *Nuclear Radiation w Vernier* folder of *Logger Pro*.
3. If you are using the Digital Monitor (black plastic case with digital meter) and the Radiation Monitor (brown plastic case with meter) place the source near the metal screen, and when using an absorber, place the absorber between the source and the screen. If you are using the Student Radiation Monitor (black plastic case with no readout), place the source near the Geiger tube window on the underside, and when using an absorber, place the absorber between the source and the window. In either case, use approximately the same position for the sources each time, with and without an absorber. The sources are usually mounted in small plastic discs, with the most radiation emitted from the underside of the disc.

Begin with no source, to determine the background count rate. Move all sources away from the monitor. Click to begin collecting data. While it may appear as if data collection did not start, *Logger Pro* is collecting data. Wait 50 s for the number of counts to appear in the meter. Record the number of counts in the no-source row of your data table, no shielding.

4. Using no absorber, place the beta source near the appropriate region of your radiation monitor, with the underside of the disc facing the monitor. Click to begin collecting data. Wait for *Logger Pro* to complete data collection. Record the number of counts in the beta row of your data table, no shielding.
5. Place a single sheet of paper between the beta source and the monitor, and measure the counts as before. Take care to keep the source in the same position with respect to the radiation monitor. Record the count rate in the appropriate place.
6. In a similar manner, record the counts for the following substances used as absorbers for each of the three sources:
 - a. a single sheet of paper
 - b. a single sheet of aluminum

Record each count in your data table.

DATA TABLE

Counts in 50 s interval			
	no shielding	shielding	
source		paper	Al sheet
none			
alpha			
beta			
gamma			

ANALYSIS

1. Compare the no-source, or background, count with the no-absorber counts for the sources. Is the background count number a significant fraction of the counts from the sources? Do you need to consider a correction for the background counts?
2. Inspect your data. Does the count rate appear to follow your initial guesses for the relative absorption of the various types of radiation by matter? Be specific, considering which source should be the most penetrating (least interacting), and which absorber is more difficult to penetrate.
3. X-rays are photons, just like gamma rays. X-rays carry lower energy, however, and so historically received a different name. If you have had an X-ray film picture of your teeth taken by a dentist, the dentist probably placed a lead-lined apron on your chest and lap before making the X-ray. What is the function of the lead apron? Support any assertion you make from your experimental data.

EXTENSIONS

1. If you were presented with a safe, but unknown, radiation source, and assuming that it emitted only one type of radiation, devise a test that would allow you to tentatively identify the type of radiation as primarily alpha, beta, or gamma. Write instructions for another student to follow in performing the test.

Your monitor detected some radiation even without a source present. Devise a method to correct for this background radiation. Do the corrected data still agree with your prediction?