

## INTRODUCTION TO RADIATION

This section presents basic facts concerning radiation. The information is intended as a basis for understanding the dose associated with releases from the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant (PORTS), not as a comprehensive discussion of radiation and its effects on the environment and biological systems. *The McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terms* (McGraw-Hill 1989) defines radiation and radioactivity as follows:

*radiation*—1) The emission and propagation of waves transmitting energy through space or through some medium; for example, the emission and propagation of electromagnetic, sound, or elastic waves. 2) The energy transmitted through space or some medium; when unqualified, usually refers to electromagnetic radiation. Also known as radiant energy. 3) A stream of particles, such as electrons, neutrons, protons, alpha particles, or high-energy photons, or a mixture of these (McGraw-Hill 1989).

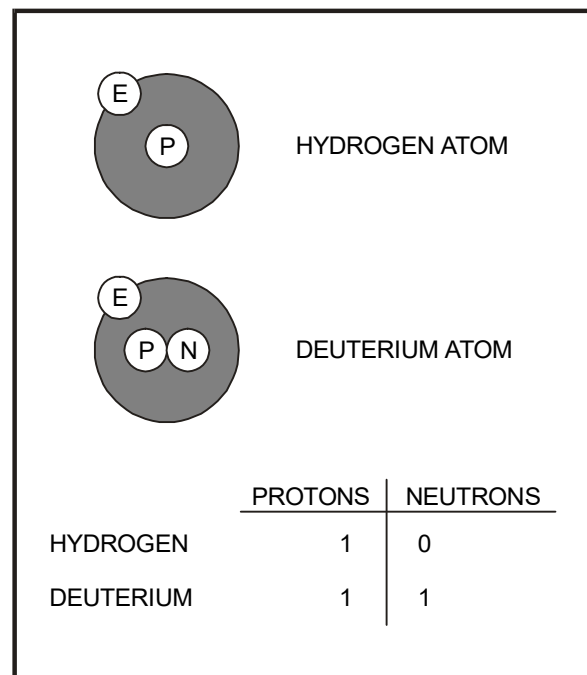
*radioactivity*—A particular type of radiation emitted by a radioactive substance, such as alpha radioactivity (McGraw-Hill 1989).

Radiation occurs naturally; it was not invented but discovered. People are constantly exposed to radiation. For example, radon in air, potassium in food and water, and uranium, thorium, and radium in the earth’s crust are all sources of radiation. The following discussion describes important aspects of radiation, including atoms and isotopes; types, sources, and pathways of radiation; radiation measurement; and dose information.

### ATOMS AND ISOTOPES

All matter is made up of atoms. An atom is “a unit of measure consisting of a single nucleus surrounded by a number of electrons equal to the number of protons in the nucleus” (American Nuclear Society 1986). The number of protons in the nucleus determines an element’s atomic number, or chemical identity. With the exception of hydrogen, the nucleus of each type of atom also contains at least one neutron. Unlike protons, the number of neutrons may vary among atoms of the same element. The number of neutrons and protons determines the atomic weight. Atoms of the same element with a different number of neutrons are called isotopes. In other words, isotopes have the same chemical properties but different atomic weights. Figure R.1 depicts isotopes of the element hydrogen.

Another example is the element uranium, which has 92 protons; all isotopes of uranium, therefore, have 92 protons. However, each uranium isotope has a different number of neutrons. Uranium-238 (also denoted <sup>238</sup>U) has 92 protons and 146 neutrons; uranium-235 has 92 protons and 143 neutrons; uranium-234 has 92 protons and 142 neutrons.



**Figure R.1. Isotopes of the element hydrogen.**

Some isotopes are stable, or nonradioactive; some are radioactive. Radioactive isotopes are called radioisotopes, or radionuclides. In an attempt to become stable, radionuclides “throw away,” or emit, rays or particles. This emission of rays and particles is known as radioactive decay. Each radionuclide has a “radioactive half-life,” which is the average time that it takes for half of a specified number of atoms to decay. Half-lives can be very short (less than a second) or very long (millions of years), depending on the radionuclide. Appendix A presents the half-lives of radionuclides of interest at PORTS.

## RADIATION

Radiation, or radiant energy, is energy in the form of waves or particles moving through space. Visible light, heat, radio waves, and alpha particles are examples of radiation. When people feel warmth from the sunlight, they are actually absorbing the radiant energy emitted by the sun.

Electromagnetic radiation is radiation in the form of electromagnetic waves; examples include gamma rays, ultraviolet light, and radio waves. Particulate radiation is radiation in the form of particles; examples include alpha and beta particles. Radiation also is characterized as ionizing or nonionizing radiation by the way in which it interacts with matter.

### Ionizing Radiation

Normally, an atom has an equal number of protons and electrons; however, atoms can lose or gain electrons in a process known as ionization. Some forms of radiation can ionize atoms by “knocking” electrons off atoms. Examples of ionizing radiation include alpha, beta, and gamma radiation.

Ionizing radiation is capable of changing the chemical state of matter and subsequently causing biological damage and thus is potentially harmful to human health. Figure R.2 shows the penetrating potential of different types of ionizing radiation.

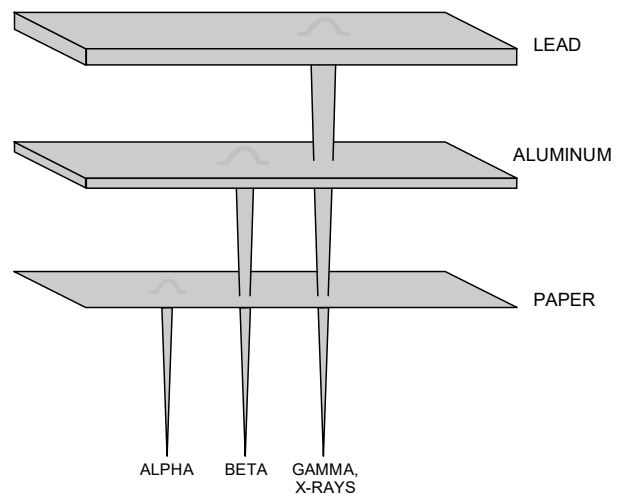


Figure R.2. Penetrating power of radiation.

### Nonionizing Radiation

Nonionizing radiation bounces off or passes through matter without displacing electrons. Examples include visible light and radio waves. Currently, it is unclear whether nonionizing radiation is harmful to human health. In the discussion that follows, the term radiation is used to describe ionizing radiation.

## SOURCES OF RADIATION

Radiation is everywhere. Most occurs naturally, but a small percentage is human-made. Naturally occurring radiation is known as background radiation.

### Background Radiation

Many materials are naturally radioactive. In fact, this naturally occurring radiation is the major source of radiation in the environment. Although people have little control over the amount of background radiation to which they are exposed, this exposure must be put into perspective. Background radiation remains relatively constant over time; background radiation present in the environment today is much the same as it was hundreds of years ago.

Sources of background radiation include uranium in the earth, radon in the air, and potassium in food. Background radiation is categorized as space, terrestrial, or internal, depending on its origin.

**Space radiation.** Energetically charged particles from outer space continuously hit the earth's atmosphere. These particles and the secondary particles and photons they create are called space or cosmic radiation. Because the atmosphere provides some shielding against space radiation, the intensity of this radiation increases with altitude above sea level. For example, a person in Denver, Colorado, is exposed to more space radiation than a person in Death Valley, California.

**Terrestrial radiation.** Terrestrial radiation refers to radiation emitted from radioactive materials in the earth's rocks, soils, and minerals. Radon (Rn); radon progeny, the relatively short-lived decay products of radium-226 ( $^{226}\text{Ra}$ ); potassium ( $^{40}\text{K}$ ); isotopes of thorium (Th); and isotopes of uranium (U) are the elements responsible for most terrestrial radiation.

**Internal radiation.** Radioactive material in the environment can enter the body through different routes of exposure, for example, the air people breathe and the food they eat; or through an open wound. Natural radionuclides that can enter the body include isotopes of uranium, thorium, radium, radon, polonium, bismuth, and lead in the  $^{238}\text{U}$  and  $^{232}\text{Th}$  decay series. In addition, the body contains isotopes of potassium ( $^{40}\text{K}$ ), rubidium ( $^{87}\text{Rb}$ ), and carbon ( $^{14}\text{C}$ ).

### **Human-made Radiation**

Most people are exposed to human-made sources of radiation. Examples include consumer products, medical sources, and industrial or occupational sources. About one-half of 1% of the U.S. population performs work in which radiation in some form is present. Atmospheric testing of atomic weapons was a source of human-made radiation, but testing has been suspended in the United States and most parts of the world. Fallout from atmospheric weapons testing is not currently a significant contributor to background radiation (Health Physics Society 2010).

**Consumer products and activities.** Some consumer products are sources of radiation. In some consumer products, such as smoke detectors, watches, or clocks, radiation is essential to the performance of the device. In other products or activities, such as smoking tobacco products or building materials, the radiation occurs incidentally to the product function. Commercial air travel is another consumer activity that results in exposure to radiation (from space radiation).

**Medical sources.** Radiation is an important tool of diagnostic medicine and treatment, and, in this use, is the main source of exposure to human-made radiation. Exposure is deliberate and directly beneficial to the patients exposed. Generally, medical exposures result from beams directed to specific areas of the body. Thus, all body organs generally are not irradiated uniformly. Radiation and radioactive materials are also used in a wide variety of pharmaceuticals and in the preparation of medical instruments, including the sterilization of heat-sensitive products such as plastic heart valves. Nuclear medicine examinations and treatment involve the internal administration of radioactive compounds, or radiopharmaceuticals, by injection, inhalation, consumption, or insertion. Even then, radionuclides are not distributed uniformly throughout the body.

**Industrial and occupational sources.** Other sources of radiation include emissions of radioactive materials from nuclear facilities such as uranium mines, fuel processing plants, and nuclear power plants; emissions from mineral extraction facilities; and the transportation of radioactive materials. Workers in certain occupations may also be exposed to radiation due to their jobs. These occupations include positions in medicine, aviation, research, education, and government.

### PATHWAYS OF RADIATION

Radiation and radioactive materials in the environment can reach people through many routes (see Figure R.3). Potential routes for radiation are referred to as pathways. For example, radioactive material in the air could fall on a pasture. The grass could then be eaten by cows, and the radioactive material on the grass would be present in the cow's milk. People drinking the milk would thus be exposed to this radiation. Or people could simply inhale the radioactive material in the air. The same events could occur with radioactive material in water. Fish living in the water would be exposed; people eating the fish would then be exposed to the radiation in the fish. Or people swimming in the water would be exposed.

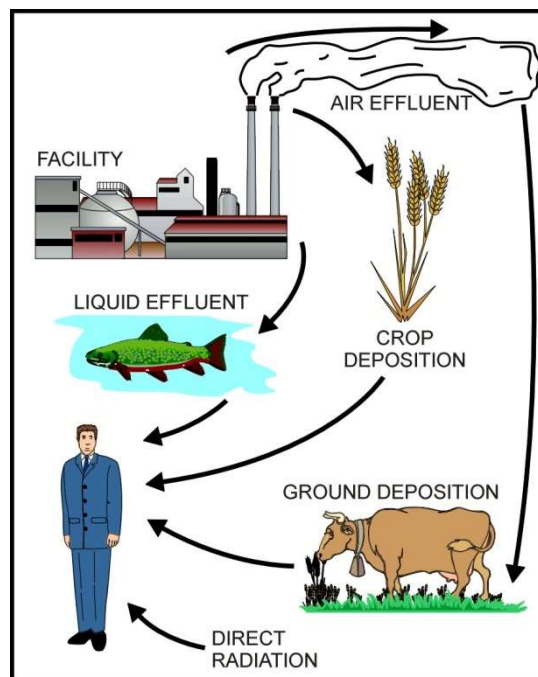


Figure R.3. Possible radiation pathways.

### MEASURING RADIATION

To determine the possible effects of radiation on the environment and the health of people, the radiation must be measured. More precisely, its potential to cause damage must be determined.

#### Activity

When measuring the amount of radiation in the environment, what is actually being measured is the rate of radioactive decay, or activity. The rate of decay varies widely among the various radionuclides. For that reason, 1 gram of a radioactive substance may contain the same amount of activity as several tons of another material. This activity is expressed in a unit of measure known as a curie (Ci). More specifically, 1 Ci = 3.7E+10 (37,000,000,000) atom disintegrations per second (dps). In the international system of units, 1 dps = 1 becquerel (Bq). Table R.1 provides units of radiation measure and applicable conversions.

Table R.1. Units of radiation measures

Current System	International System	Conversion
curie (Ci)	becquerel (Bq)	1 Ci = 3.7 x 10 <sup>10</sup> Bq
rad (radiation absorbed dose)	gray (Gy)	1 rad = 0.01 Gy
rem (roentgen equivalent man)	sievert (Sv)	1 rem = 0.01 Sv

#### Absorbed Dose

The total amount of energy absorbed per unit mass as a result of exposure to radiation is expressed in a unit of measure known as a rad. In the international system of units, 100 rad equals 1 gray (Gy). In terms of human health, however, it is the effect of the absorbed energy that is important, not the actual amount.

## Dose Terminology

The measure of potential biological damage caused by exposure to and subsequent absorption of radiation is expressed in a unit of measure known as a rem. One rem of any type of radiation has the same total damaging effect. Because a rem represents a fairly large dose, dose is expressed as a millirem (mrem) or 1/1000 of a rem. In the international system of units, 100 rem equals 1 sievert (Sv); 100 mrem equals 1 millisievert (mSv). Specific types of dose are defined as follows:

- **equivalent dose** – The product of the absorbed dose (rad) in tissue and a radiation weighting factor. Equivalent dose is expressed in units of rem (or sievert) (1 rem = 0.01 sievert).
- **committed equivalent dose** – The calculated equivalent dose to a tissue or organ over a 50-year period after known intake of a radionuclide into the body. Contributions from external dose are not included. Committed equivalent dose is expressed in units of rem (or sievert).
- **committed effective dose** – The sum of the committed equivalent doses to various tissues in the body, each multiplied by the appropriate tissue weighting factor. Committed effective dose is expressed in units of rem (or sievert).
- **effective dose** – The sum of the doses received by all organs or tissues of the body after each one has been multiplied by the appropriate tissue weighting factor. It includes the dose from radiation sources internal and/or external to the body. Effective dose is expressed in units of rem (or sievert). In this report, the term “effective dose” is often shortened to “dose”.
- **collective dose** – The sum of the effective doses to all persons in a specified population received in a specified period of time. Collective dose is expressed in units of person-rem (or person-sievert). This dose is also called the population dose.

## DOSE SOURCES

Determining dose is an involved process using complex mathematical equations based on several factors, including the type of radiation, the rate of exposure, weather conditions, and typical diet. Basically, ionizing radiation is generated from radioactive decay, or activity. People absorb some of the energy to which they are exposed. This absorbed energy is calculated as part of an individual’s dose. Whether radiation is natural or human-made, its effects on people are the same.

Table R.2 presents a scale of dose levels. Included is an example of the type of exposure that may cause such a dose or the special significance of such a dose. This information is intended to familiarize the reader with the type of doses individuals may receive.

### Dose from space radiation

The average annual dose received by residents of the United States from space radiation is about 33 mrem/year (0.33 mSv/year) (National Council on Radiation Protection [NCRP] 2009). The average annual dose to a person living in Honolulu, Hawaii (at sea level and near the equator) is about 20 mrem/year (0.2 mSv/year), while the average annual dose to a person living in Colorado Springs, Colorado (high altitude and latitude) is about 70 mrem/year (0.7 mSv/year) (Health Physics Society 2010).

### Dose from terrestrial radiation

The average annual dose received from terrestrial gamma radiation is about 21 mrem/year (0.21 mSv/year) in the United States (NCRP 2009). Similar to space radiation, this dose varies geographically across the country with the lowest doses on the Atlantic and Gulf coastal plains and highest doses in the mountains in the western United States.

**Table R.2. Comparison and description of various dose levels<sup>a</sup>**

Dose level	Description
0.85 mrem (0.0085 mSv)	Approximate daily dose from natural background radiation, including radon
1.92 mrem (0.0192 mSv)	Cosmic dose to a person on a one-way airplane flight from Washington D.C. to Seattle
10 mrem (0.10 mSv)	Annual exposure limit, set by U.S. EPA, for exposures from airborne emissions from operations of nuclear fuel cycle facilities, including power plants and uranium mines and mills
36 mrem (0.36 mSv)	Average annual dose to a person who smokes one pack of cigarettes per day
36 mrem (0.36 mSv)	Mammogram (two views)
46 mrem (0.46 mSv)	Estimate of the largest dose any off-site person could have received from the March 28, 1979, Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident
60 mrem (0.60 mSv)	X-ray (single exposure) of abdomen or hip
100 mrem (1.00 mSv)	Annual limit of dose from all DOE facilities to a member of the public who is not a radiation worker
244 mrem (2.44 mSv)	Average dose from an upper gastrointestinal diagnostic X-ray series
300 mrem (3.00 mSv)	Average annual dose to a person in the United States from all sources of medical radiation
311 mrem (3.11 mSv)	Average annual dose to a person in the United States from all sources of natural background radiation
700 mrem (7.0 mSv)	Computed tomography – chest
1-5 rem (0.01-0.05 Sv)	U.S. EPA protective action guideline calling for public officials to take emergency action when the dose to a member of the public from a nuclear accident will likely reach this range
5 rem (0.05 Sv)	Annual dose limit for occupational exposure of radiation workers set by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and DOE
10 rem (0.10 Sv)	The Biological Effects of Ionizing Radiation V report estimated that an acute dose at this level would result in a lifetime excess risk of death from cancer of 0.8% (Biological Effects of Ionizing Radiation 1990)
25 rem (0.25 Sv)	U.S. EPA guideline for voluntary maximum dose to emergency workers for non-lifesaving work during an emergency
75 rem (0.75 Sv)	U.S. EPA guideline for maximum dose to emergency workers volunteering for lifesaving work
50-600 rem (0.50-6.00 Sv)	Doses in this range received over a short period of time will produce radiation sickness in varying degrees. At the lower end of this range, people are expected to recover completely, given proper medical attention. At the top of this range, most people would die within 60 days

<sup>a</sup>Adapted from Savannah River Site Environmental Report for 1993, Summary Pamphlet, WSRC-TR-94-076, Westinghouse Savannah River Company, 1994 and NCRP Report No. 160, *Ionizing Radiation Exposure of the Population of the United States* (NCRP 2009).

### **Dose from internal radiation**

Inhalation of the short-lived decay products of radon are the major contributors to the annual dose equivalent for internal radionuclides (mostly  $^{222}\text{Rn}$ ). They contribute an average annual dose of about 228 mrem/year (2.28 mSv/year) (NCRP 2009). The average annual dose from ingestion of radionuclides is about 29 mrem/year (0.29 mSv/year), which can be attributed to the naturally occurring radioisotope of potassium,  $^{40}\text{K}$ ; and radioisotopes of thorium (Th), uranium (U), and their decay series (NCRP 2009).

### **Dose from consumer products**

The U.S. average annual dose received by an individual from consumer products is about 13 mrem/year (0.13 mSv/year) (NCRP 2009). Almost 90 percent of this annual dose results from smoking cigarettes, commercial air travel, and building materials (radionuclides present in brick, masonry, cement, concrete, and other materials).

### **Dose from medical sources**

Medical exams and procedures account for the largest portion of the average annual dose received from human-made sources. These procedures include x-rays, computed tomography (a more sophisticated type of x-ray), and fluoroscopy, and nuclear medicine. The increase in the use of medical imaging procedures, especially computed tomography, over the last 25 years has resulted in a marked increase in the average annual dose from medical sources received by a person in the United States: 53 mrem/year in the early 1980s to 300 mrem/year in 2006 (NCRP 2009). The actual annual doses received by individuals who complete such medical exams can be much higher than the average value because not everyone receives such exams each year.

### **Doses from industrial and occupational sources**

Small doses received by individuals occur as a result of emissions of radioactive materials from nuclear facilities, emissions from certain mineral extraction facilities, and transportation of radioactive materials. The combination of these sources contributes less than 1 mrem/year (0.01 mSv/year) to the average annual dose to an individual (NCRP 2009).