

2.5 The Belt of Stability - Predicting the Type of Radioactivity

Skills to Develop

- To understand the factors that affect nuclear stability.

Although most of the known elements have at least one isotope whose atomic nucleus is stable indefinitely, all elements have isotopes that are unstable and disintegrate, or decay, at measurable rates by emitting radiation. Some elements have no stable isotopes and eventually decay to other elements. In contrast to the chemical reactions that are the main focus of all the other chapters, and are due to changes in the arrangements of the valence electrons of atoms, the process of nuclear decay results in changes inside an atomic nucleus. We begin our discussion of nuclear reactions by reviewing the conventions used to describe the components of the nucleus.

The Atomic Nucleus

Each element can be represented by the notation ${}^A_Z\text{X}$, where A , the mass number, is the sum of the number of protons and the number of neutrons, and Z , the atomic number, is the number of protons. The protons and neutrons that make up the nucleus of an atom are called **nucleons**, and an atom with a particular number of protons and neutrons is called a **nuclide**. Nuclides with the same number of protons but different numbers of neutrons are called **isotopes**. Isotopes can also be represented by an alternative notation that uses the name of the element followed by the mass number, such as carbon-12. The stable isotopes of oxygen, for example, can be represented in any of the following ways:

${}^A_Z\text{X}$	${}^{16}_8\text{O}$	${}^{17}_8\text{O}$	${}^{18}_8\text{O}$
${}^A\text{X}$	${}^{16}\text{O}$	${}^{17}\text{O}$	${}^{18}\text{O}$
element-A:	oxygen-16	oxygen-17	oxygen-18

Because the number of neutrons is equal to $A - Z$, we see that the first isotope of oxygen has 8 neutrons, the second isotope 9 neutrons, and the third isotope 10 neutrons. Isotopes of all naturally occurring elements on Earth are present in nearly fixed proportions, with each proportion constituting an isotope's *natural abundance*. For example, in a typical terrestrial sample of oxygen, 99.76% of the O atoms is oxygen-16, 0.20% is oxygen-18, and 0.04% is oxygen-17. Any nucleus that is unstable and decays spontaneously is said to be **radioactive**, emitting subatomic particles and electromagnetic radiation. The emissions are collectively called *radioactivity* and can be measured. Isotopes that emit radiation are called **radioisotopes**.

Nuclear Stability

The nucleus of an atom occupies a tiny fraction of the volume of an atom and contains the number of protons and neutrons that is characteristic of a given isotope. Electrostatic repulsions would normally cause the positively charged protons to repel each other, but the nucleus does not fly apart because of the **strong nuclear force**, an extremely powerful but very short-range attractive force between nucleons (Figure 1). All stable nuclei except the hydrogen-1 nucleus (${}^1\text{H}$) contain at least one neutron to overcome the electrostatic repulsion between protons. As the number of protons in the nucleus increases, the number of neutrons needed for a stable nucleus increases even more rapidly. Too many protons (or too few neutrons) in the nucleus result in an imbalance between forces, which leads to nuclear instability.

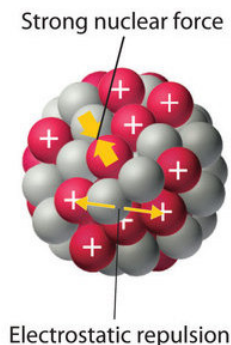


Figure 1: *Competing Interactions within the Atomic Nucleus.* Electrostatic repulsions between positively charged protons would normally cause the nuclei of atoms (except H) to fly apart. In stable atomic nuclei, these repulsions are overcome by the strong nuclear force, a short-range but powerful attractive interaction between nucleons. If the attractive interactions due to the strong nuclear force are weaker than the electrostatic repulsions between protons, the nucleus is unstable, and it will eventually decay.

The relationship between the number of protons and the number of neutrons in stable nuclei, arbitrarily defined as having a half-life longer than 10 times the age of Earth, is shown graphically in Figure 2. The stable isotopes form a “peninsula of stability” in a “sea of instability.” Only two stable isotopes, ^1H and ^3He , have a neutron-to-proton ratio less than 1. Several stable isotopes of light atoms have a neutron-to-proton ratio equal to 1 (e.g., ^4He , ^{10}B , and ^{40}Ca). All other stable nuclei have a higher neutron-to-proton ratio, which increases steadily to about 1.5 for the heaviest nuclei. Regardless of the number of neutrons, however, all elements with $Z > 83$ are unstable and radioactive.

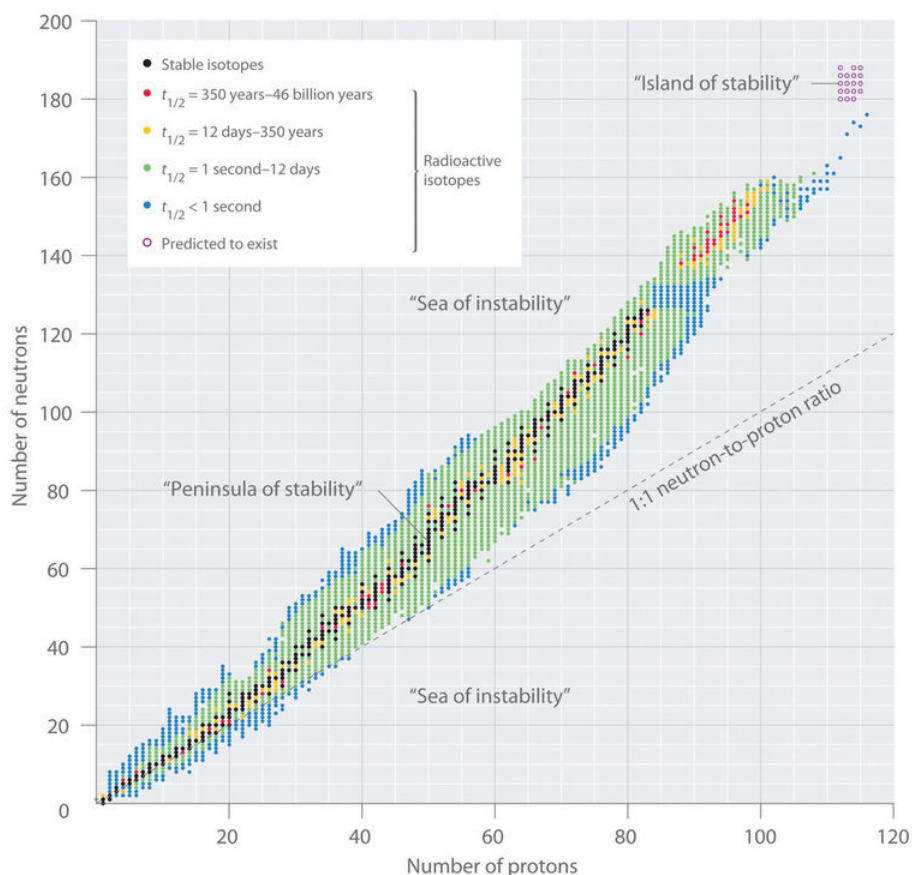


Figure 2: *The Relationship between Nuclear Stability and the Neutron-to-Proton Ratio.* In this plot of the number of neutrons versus the number of protons, each black point corresponds to a stable nucleus. In this classification, a stable nucleus is arbitrarily defined as one with a half-life longer than 46 billion years (10 times the age of Earth). As the number of protons (the atomic number) increases, the number of neutrons required for a stable nucleus increases even more rapidly. Isotopes shown in red, yellow, green, and blue are progressively less stable and more radioactive; the farther an isotope is from the diagonal band of stable isotopes, the shorter its half-life. The purple dots indicate superheavy nuclei that are predicted to be relatively stable, meaning that they are expected to be radioactive but to have relatively long half-lives. In most cases, these elements have not yet been observed or synthesized. Data source: National Nuclear Data Center, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Evaluated Nuclear Structure Data File (ENSDF), Chart of Nuclides, <http://www.nndc.bnl.gov/chart>.

As shown in Figure 3, more than half of the stable nuclei (166 out of 279) have even numbers of both neutrons and protons; only 6 of the 279 stable nuclei do not have odd numbers of both. Moreover, certain numbers of neutrons or protons result in especially stable nuclei; these are the so-called *magic numbers* 2, 8, 20, 50, 82, and 126. For example, tin ($Z = 50$) has 10 stable isotopes, but the elements on either side of tin in the periodic table, indium ($Z = 49$) and antimony ($Z = 51$), have only 2 stable isotopes each. Nuclei with magic numbers of *both* protons *and* neutrons are said to be “doubly magic” and are even more stable. Examples of

elements with doubly magic nuclei are ${}^4_2\text{He}$, with 2 protons and 2 neutrons, and ${}^{208}_{82}\text{Pb}$, with 82 protons and 126 neutrons, which is the heaviest known stable isotope of any element.

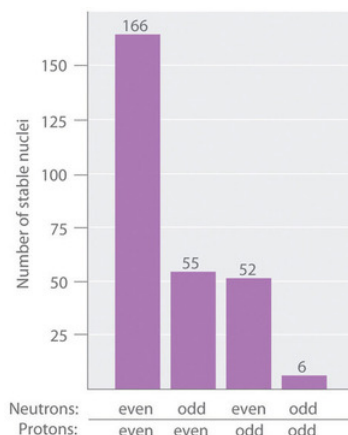


Figure 3: The Relationship between the Number of Protons and the Number of Neutrons and Nuclear Stability.

Most stable nuclei contain **even** numbers of both neutrons and protons

The pattern of stability suggested by the magic numbers of nucleons is reminiscent of the stability associated with the closed-shell electron configurations of the noble gases in group 18 and has led to the hypothesis that the nucleus contains shells of nucleons that are in some ways analogous to the shells occupied by electrons in an atom. As shown in Figure 2, the “peninsula” of stable isotopes is surrounded by a “reef” of radioactive isotopes, which are stable enough to exist for varying lengths of time before they eventually decay to produce other nuclei.

Origin of the Magic Numbers

Multiple models have been formulated to explain the origin of the magic numbers and two popular ones are the [Nuclear Shell Model](#) and the [Liquid Drop Model](#). Unfortunately, both require advanced quantum mechanics to fully understand and are beyond the scope of this text.

Superheavy Elements

In addition to the “peninsula of stability” there is a small “island of stability” that is predicted to exist in the upper right corner. This island corresponds to the **superheavy elements**, with atomic numbers near the magic number 126. Because the next magic number for neutrons should be 184, it was suggested that an element with 114 protons and 184 neutrons might be stable enough to exist in nature. Although these claims were met with skepticism for many years, since 1999 a few atoms of isotopes with $Z = 114$ and $Z = 116$ have been prepared and found to be surprisingly stable. One isotope of element 114 lasts 2.7 seconds before decaying, described as an “eternity” by nuclear chemists. Moreover, there is recent evidence for the existence of a nucleus with $A = 292$ that was found in ${}^{232}\text{Th}$. With an estimated half-life greater than 10^8 years, the isotope is particularly stable. Its measured mass is consistent with predictions for the mass of an isotope with $Z = 122$. Thus a number of relatively long-lived nuclei may well be accessible among the superheavy elements.

Summary

Subatomic particles of the nucleus (protons and neutrons) are called **nucleons**. A **nuclide** is an atom with a particular number of protons and neutrons. An unstable nucleus that decays spontaneously is **radioactive**, and its emissions are collectively called **radioactivity**. Isotopes that emit radiation are called **radioisotopes**. Each nucleon is attracted to other nucleons by the **strong nuclear force**. Stable nuclei generally have even numbers of both protons and neutrons and a neutron-to-proton ratio of at least 1. Nuclei that contain *magic numbers* of protons and neutrons are often especially stable. **Superheavy elements**, with atomic numbers near 126, may even be stable enough to exist in nature.

modified by [Tom Neils](#) (Grand Rapids Community College)

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