

Natural Decay Series: Uranium, Radium, and Thorium

Uranium, radium, and thorium occur in three natural decay series, headed by uranium-238, thorium-232, and uranium-235, respectively. In nature, the radionuclides in these three series are approximately in a state of secular equilibrium, in which the activities of all radionuclides within each series are nearly equal.

Two conditions are necessary for secular equilibrium. First, the parent radionuclide must have a half-life much longer than that of any other radionuclide in the series. Second, a sufficiently long period of time must have elapsed, for example ten half-lives of the decay product having the longest half-life, to allow for ingrowth of the decay products (*see the companion fact sheet on Ionizing Radiation*). Under secular equilibrium, the activity of the parent radionuclide undergoes no appreciable changes during many half-lives of its decay products.

The radionuclides of the uranium-238, thorium-232, and uranium-235 decay series are shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3, along with the major mode of radioactive decay for each. Radioactive decay occurs when an unstable (radioactive) isotope transforms to a more stable isotope, generally by emitting a subatomic particle such as an alpha or beta particle. Radionuclides that give rise to alpha and beta particles are shown in these figures, as are those that emit significant gamma radiation.

Gamma radiation is not a mode of radioactive decay (such as alpha and beta decay). Rather, it is a mechanism by which excess energy is emitted from certain radionuclides, i.e., as highly energetic electromagnetic radiation emitted from the nucleus of the atom. For simplicity, only significant gamma emissions associated with the major decay modes are shown in Figures 1 through 3; that is, radionuclides listed are those for which the radiation dose associated with gamma rays may pose a health concern. The gamma component is not shown for those radionuclides whose gamma emissions do not generally represent a concern.

Of the two conditions noted above for secular equilibrium, the first is met for the uranium-238, thorium-232 and uranium-235 decay series in naturally occurring ores. While the second condition may not be met for all ores or other deposits of uranium and thorium (given the extremely long half-lives for the radionuclides involved and the geological changes that occur over similar time scales), it is reasonable to assume secular equilibrium for naturally occurring ores to estimate the concentrations of the various daughter radionuclides that accompany the parent. The state of secular equilibrium in natural uranium and thorium ores is significantly altered when they are processed to extract specific radionuclides.

After processing, radionuclides with half-lives less than one year will reestablish equilibrium conditions with their longer-lived parent radionuclides within several years. For this reason, at processing sites what was once a single, long decay series (for example the series for uranium-238) may be present as several smaller decay series headed by the longer-lived decay products of the original series (that is, headed by uranium-238, uranium-234, thorium-230, radium-226, and lead-210 in the case of uranium-238). Each of these subseries can be considered to represent a new, separate decay series. Understanding the physical and chemical processes associated with materials containing uranium, thorium, and radium is important when addressing associated radiological risks.

In the fact sheets developed for uranium, radium, and thorium, the contributions of radionuclides having half-lives less than one year were included in the risk coefficients. (Each fact sheet identifies which radionuclides are included in these coefficients.) In some situations, it may be necessary to add the radiological risk identified for a given radionuclide to that of its parent radionuclide to properly represent the total risk. For example, the radiological risk for thorium-232 is comprised of the risk for thorium-232 plus the risk for radium-228. Decay series information should be used together with the information in these fact sheets to ensure that the radiological risks associated with uranium, radium, and thorium are properly estimated and represented.

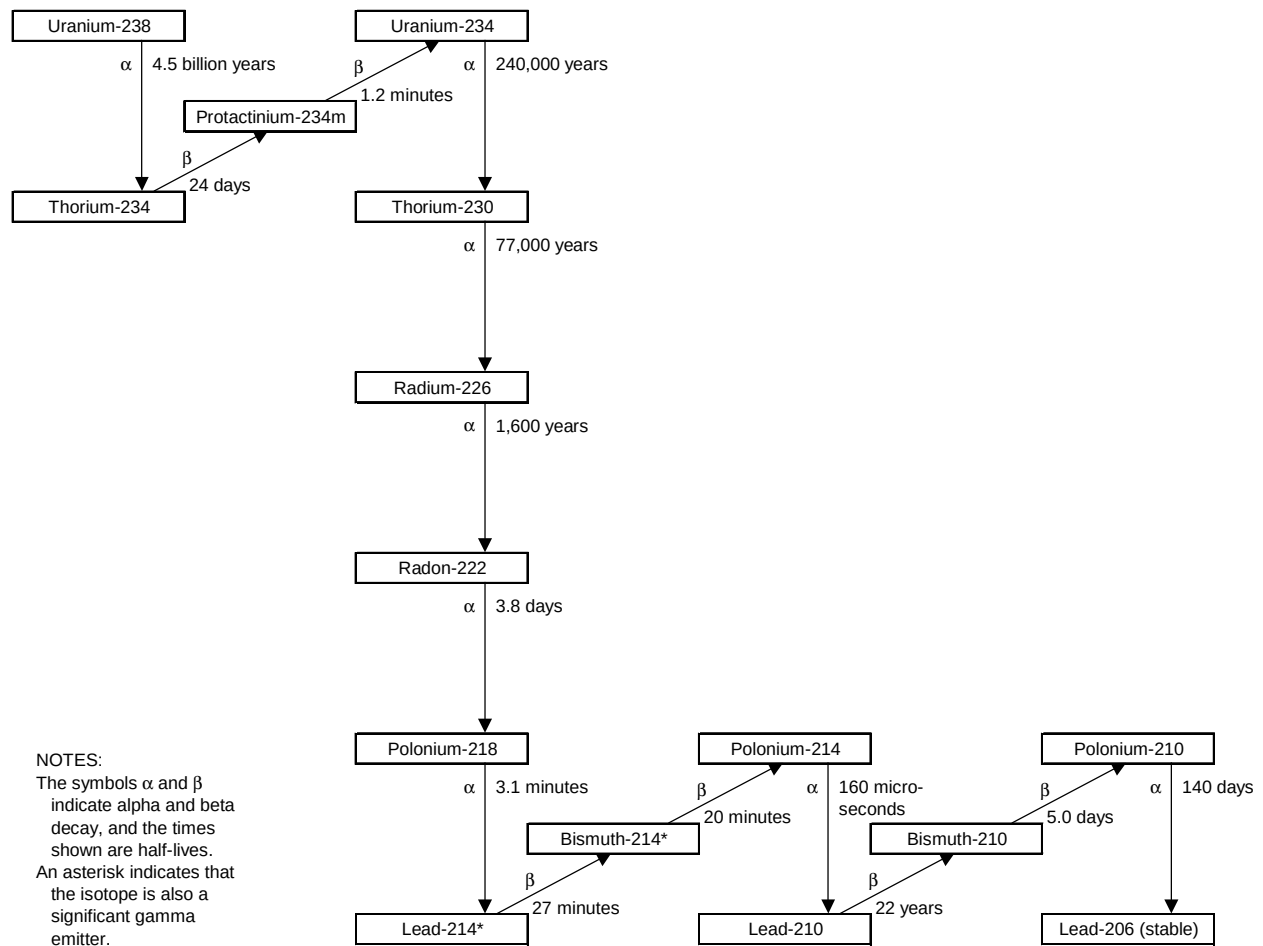


FIGURE 1. Uranium-238 Radioactive Decay Series

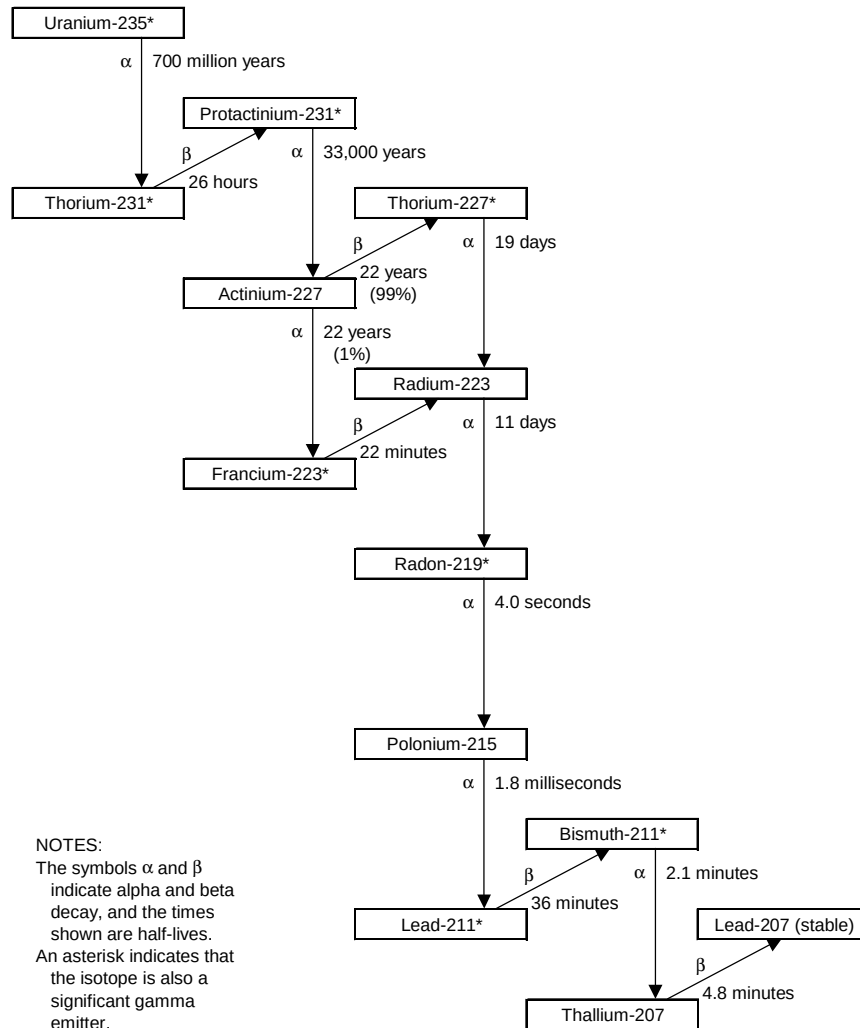


FIGURE 2. Uranium-235 Radioactive Decay Series

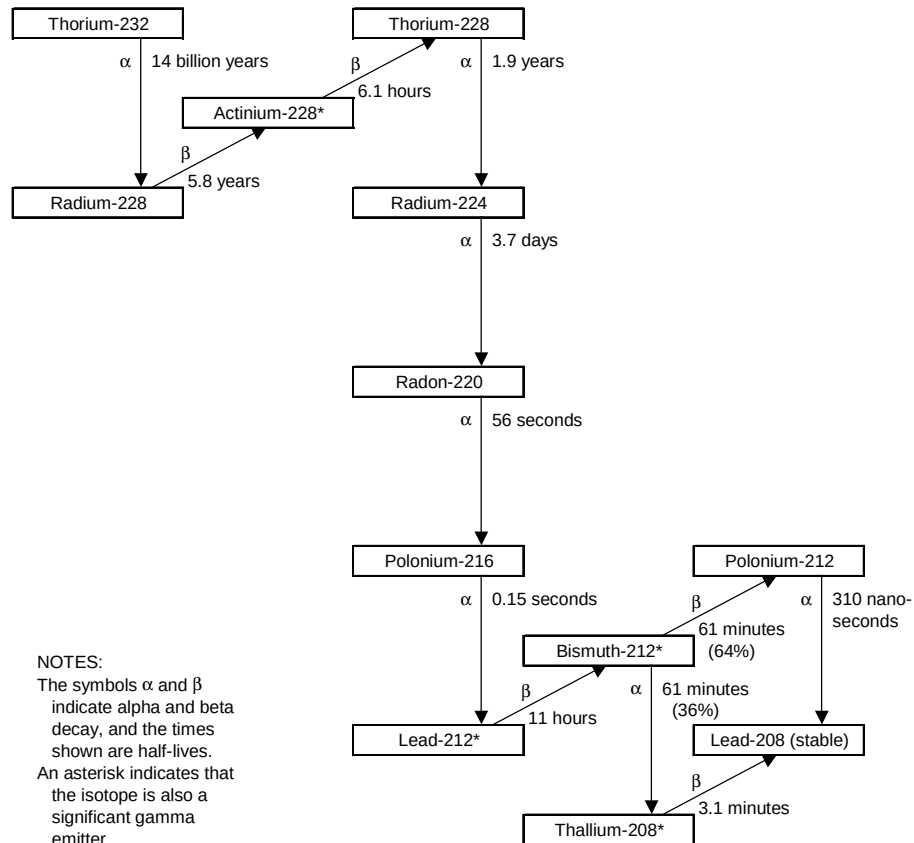


FIGURE 3. Thorium-232 Radioactive Decay Series