

DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICS AND TECHNOLOGY

Master Thesis in Nuclear Physics

En lang tittel er grei å splitte sånn ca på midten

By: Lena Setterdahl
Supervisor: Dieter Roherich

June 22, 2020

Contents

1	Neutron detection	1
1.1	Neutron Detectors	1
1.1.1	Basic Particle Detectors	1
1.1.2	Reactions of Neutron Detection	2
1.2	Gadolinium: as a Neutron Converter Material	4
1.2.1	Reaction Energy Spectrum	5
2	Semiconductors	7
2.1	Energy Band Diagram	7
2.2	Doped semiconductors	7
2.3	Pn-junction diode	8
2.3.1	Reverse Bias, Charge Collection and Pulse Signal?	9

Chapter 1

Neutron detection

1.1 Neutron Detectors

Neutrons are more difficult to detect than other types of radiation. A general particle detector has a sensitive volume and when charged particles traverse it they deposit some or all of their energy by ionization. Neutrons are neutral particles and do not interact electromagnetically, thus are not capable of direct ionization. A neutron reacts by hadronic forces, also known as the residual strong force. The hadronic force is a much stronger force than the electromagnetic but has a much shorter interaction range (10^{-15}m). This force occurs between hadrons, for instance between a neutron and nucleons of an atom. So, while a neutron may not directly deposit its energy through ionization it can induce a nuclear reaction. Secondary charged particles may occur from such a reaction and in turn transfer energy to the detector's sensitive volume. Neutrons can therefore be detected by combining a neutron conversion material with a general particle/radiation detector. In principle any particle detector can be turned into a neutron detector. A brief introduction to the most common particle detectors is in place.

1.1.1 Basic Particle Detectors

One of the major components of a particle detector is the sensitive volume. Incoming radiation interacts with the sensitive volume and one way or another creates electrical charges responsible for a detector signal. In gas detectors this volume is, intuitively enough, filled with gas. In semiconductors a solid material fills the volume. Scintillators may incorporate material of either gas, liquid or solids, depending on detector application and requirements. Reacting with the sensitive volume, radiation may produce charge carriers directly, like in gas detectors (ion pairs) and semiconductors (electron-hole pairs), or cause a process which subsequently produces charge carriers, like in scintillators (photoelectrons).

The Gas Detector The basic components of a gas detector are the gas-filled chamber (i.e. sensitive volume) and electrodes (cathode and anode, i.e. the charge collectors). In general, the outer chamber-wall (cathode) is most often spherical or cylindrical and encompasses the, usually rod-shaped, anode. A voltage is applied to the collector plates and gives rise to an electric field between the two. When an energetic particle enters the gas-filled chamber the gas molecules are ionized. With enough energy the incoming particles can tear an electron from its atom and produce an ion pair. The electric field between the collector plates attracts the newly created charges, the positive ion to the cathode (-) and electron to the anode (+). A charged particle in an electric field experiences a force and the magnitude of its acceleration

depends on the particles mass. The electrons significantly smaller mass (??) causes it to accelerate at a considerably larger rate than the heavy ion and is thus the first of the two to be collected. The speed at which charge carriers travels depends on the chamber pressure and the applied field strength.

The Scintillation Detector

The Semiconductor Detector These detectors are initially oblivious to non-ionizing radiation such as neutrons. However, by incorporating a converter material to the design it allows for indirect detection thereof.

1.1.2 Reactions of Neutron Detection

Neutron Energies Dependence

Neutrons reaction probability with matter is heavily dependent on its energy and are categorized into four regions. Slow neutrons have energies 0-0.4 MeV and their reaction probability drop inversely with their speed. The intermediate neutron energy range is the interval 0.4-200keV. Many reactions have resonances in this interval, and it is therefore also known as the resonance region. Most neutrons, however, are created with a much larger energy and are labeled as fast neutrons, 200 keV-20 MeV. Lastly, neutrons energies beyond 20MeV are known as high energy neutrons. High neutrons exceed the scope of this thesis and will not be discussed any further. Neutron reaction cross-section is much higher in the slow and intermediate domain than the fast and high domain. As the neutron speed v increases from slow to intermediate, many reaction probabilities decrease proportionally to $1/v$. Once the energy reaches the domain of intermediate neutrons a number of reactions experience resonance. Moving into the fast neutron region, the likelihood of nuclear reactions lessens, and the probability of elastic scattering takes over. Elastic scattering is widely used in detection of fast neutrons. The interaction produces no secondary particles, but rather results in a recoil nucleus which is responsible for ionizing the detector medium. Fast neutrons have a tendency to scatter more easily of atoms, especially those with a low atomic number such as hydrogen (Ref. on elastic scattering of hydrogen?).

Reaction Characteristics

To ensure good quality neutron signals the conversion material must meet certain standards. First and foremost, it is essential that the material possesses a high probability of neutron interaction. The ideal situation would be 100% neutron detection, no neutrons going unseen. Nevertheless, this is usually not the case since some neutrons pass through the conversion material unaffected or react in other non-signal generating ways. High neutron reaction probability is therefore an essential characteristic of the conversion material to ensure a high detection efficiency.

Another important trait of a neutron detector is gamma discrimination. Often, neutrons are accompanied by gamma-radiation, to which neutron detectors have a similar response. This makes the identification of neutrons somewhat more difficult. Reactions with a high Q-value yield highly energetic particles and produce high signals. In comparison, energy deposited by gamma-rays are much lower. Incorporating conversion materials based on high Q reactions is one way to better distinguishing neutron from gamma signals. In intense gamma-fields, however, the accumulation of photon signals can become a problem.

Popular reactions

Popular nuclear reactions used to convert a neutron into signal inducing radiation are exoergic reactions and radiative capture. Typical nuclear reactions used in neutron detection are $\text{B-10}(n,\alpha)\text{Li-7}$, $\text{Li-6}(n,\alpha)\text{T}$, $\text{He-3}(n,p)\text{T}$ and $\text{Gd}(n,\gamma)\text{Gd}^*$. The first three classified as exoergic reactions and the last one as radiative capture. An exoergic reaction is a nuclear reaction with a positive Q -value. This means the reaction products have a higher kinetic energy than the incident particle. These reactions commonly exhibit a high reaction probability for thermal neutrons and produce high energy and easily detectable particles. Radiative capture is a reaction in which an incident neutron is absorbed by the target nucleus and forms a compound nucleus that decays to its ground state through radiative decay. The probability of absorption is large for thermal neutrons in heavy material and the probability of competing reactions, like elastic scattering, is small.

Probably one of the most popular reactions in the detection of slow/thermal neutrons is the **$\text{B-10}(n,\alpha)\text{Li-7}$** reaction. The most probable outcome of the reaction dominates 94% of the capture events and produces a Li-7^* nucleus in its first excited state and an alpha particle. The remaining six per cent lead to the same reaction products, the only difference being Li-7 in ground state and higher reaction energy. In nearly all events a 480 keV gamma is emitted by the excited nucleus. Since neutron detectors are also gamma sensitive these gamma-rays are often of value and can be used as neutron indicators along with the emitted alpha particle (google this?). A particularly attractive trait of B-10 is its high cross-section of 3840 barns at thermal energies, as well as the reaction products short range and high energy deposit such that gamma induced signals are relatively small. Even more interesting, B-10 comes in many different compound forms, making it an extremely versatile element of neutron measurements. As a gas, it is frequently used in BF_3 -filled proportional counters; as a solid, it can be applied as a lining to proportional-counters filled with a common proportional-counter gas; and as an oxide, incorporated in zinc sulfide in scintillators or dissolved as methyl borate in organic scintillators. The list goes on. At higher neutron energies the reaction equation changes substantially. The branching ratio begins to even out and the fraction of events producing gamma shrink from 94% to 33%. Furthermore, at neutron energies 5-10 MeV other secondary particles can be produced, e.g. proton, deuterons and tritons, as observed by Frye and Gammel in 1956 (9). These effects, however, are not of great concern as the reaction cross sections are low and B-10 is not used in fast neutron detection.

The **$\text{Li-6}(n,\alpha)\text{T}$** reactions cross section is 940 barns for thermal energies and decreases with neutron energy until it exhibits resonance in the intermediate range around 250keV. Similar to $\text{B-10}(n,\alpha)\text{Li-7}$, its thermal cross section is proportional to the inverse speed of the incident neutron. Though the cross section is less than that of B-10, a higher reaction energy, which helps distinguish reaction particles from gamma rays, is at its advantage. Lithium is widely available in various forms but exhibits no solid compounds applicable for neutron detection and is therefore less versatile than boron. For slow neutron detecting scintillators, $\text{Li-6}(n,\alpha)\text{T}$ is the most commonly used nuclear reaction.

A reaction which has long been the mainstay of neutron detection is **$\text{He-3}(n,p)\text{T}$** . He-3 is a noble gas and, when of sufficient purity, it is well suited as a counting gas. Its high thermal cross section of 5330 barns makes it a very attractive conversion material and is therefore preferred in applications requiring high detection efficiency. Despite having a high detection probability, the Q -value is small and makes gamma-discrimination considerably more diffi-

cult than for boron-enriched BF₃ proportional counters. Stock supplies of He-3 were in good shape up until the years following the attack of September 9th, 2001. Prices of He-3 skyrocketed along with the demands on nuclear security resulting in a worldwide shortage thereof (AMBIGUIOUS!!). Although He-3 cross section exceeds that of B-10(n, α)Li-7, its relatively high cost often hinders it from being used. The search for new alternative neutron detection methods have therefore become a popular topic within the scientific community of nuclear instrumentation (Dumarezt?).

In recent decades, gadolinium (Gd) has been proposed as an alternative to He-3 proportional counters. Historically gadolinium is known as a neutron poison due to its high neutron absorption characteristics. Neutron capture in gadolinium is a nuclear reaction categorized as radiative capture. In consideration of neutron detection, gadolinium is a very attractive converter material due to its huge absorption cross-section for thermal neutrons. The gadolinium isotope Gd-157 has in fact the largest cross-section for any known stable isotope of a whopping 254000 barns. That is ?? times larger than the thermal reaction probability of He-3! The most common gadolinium isotopes used in neutron conversion are Gd-155 and Gd-157 for their high reaction probability. The abundance of Gd-155 and Gd-157 is % and %, respectively. Their reaction equations are:

Not only do the capture reactions possess a high probability for thermal neutrons, they also yield a significant amount of energy. This energy is released in the form of gamma-transitions and gives rise to prompt gamma-rays and electrons, i.e. signal generating radiation.

TEST

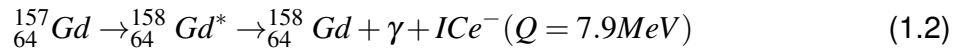
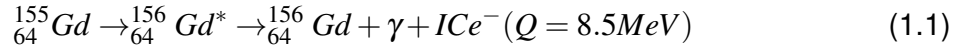
1.2 Gadolinium: as a Neutron Converter Material

Gadolinium (Gd) is a chemical element with atomic number 64. It is a metal and appears as a solid under standard pressure and room temperature. In nature Gd occurs as a composition of seven isotopes; the most abundant being Gd-158 (24.84%), followed by Gd-160 (21.86%), Gd-156 (20.47%), Gd-157 (15.67%) and Gd-157 (14.80%).

Gd has many favorable characteristics allowing an eclectic range of use; for instance in alloys to make magnets, electronics and data storage disks(*); and as a contrast agent in MRI, to diagnose cancerous tumors(*). Of particular interest is its high neutron absorption cross section, high probability of neutron capture. Of all known natural occurring nuclei, Gd-157 has the highest neutron absorption cross section having resonance at thermal-neutron energies (*). As efficient neutron absorbers, Gd plays an important role in neutron shielding alloys for nuclear reactor safety and storage (*). An additional use of great Gd neutron capture is as Gd-based neutron poison, for instance Gd(III) nitrate in moderator systems for regulating power generation and shut-down of Heavy Water Nuclear Reactors (* page 31). Not limited to the field of nuclear physics, Gd neutron absorption capability also benefit(s?) neutron capture therapy for cancer treatment and neutron detection, due to reaction products following neutron capture. In gadolinium neutron capture therapy (GdNCT) a cancer patient is injected with Gd endused tracer followed by exposure to a neutron beam. Neutron absorbed by the Gd tracer produce secondary particles such as photons and electrons. While traversing tissue, the particles deposits dose and The particles travels the tissue exposed to a neutron beam, once Gd absorbs neutrons, decays and release product particles the particles is injected to the cancer patient product particles deposits dose locally to

Neutron capture cross section of natural Gd is given by the weighted sum of isotopic cross sections. Relative abundance of Gd isotopes in natural Gd and their neutron capture cross section are listed in table 1. Isotopes Gd-157 and Gd-155 collectively contribute 99.99% of the cross section, resulting in 48800 ± 150 barns. Natural Gd interaction with thermal neutrons may therefore be simplified as a “two-absorbing isotope system” consisting of the isotopes Gd155 and Gd157 [Dumazert, 2018].

Since natural Gd interaction with neutrons can be ascribed to isotopes Gd-157 and Gd-155, it is worth studying their corresponding nuclear reaction equation.



Once a Gd nuclei has absorbed a neutron it exists in an excited energy state from which it decays by gamma-transition, resulting primarily in gamma-ray (γ -ray) emission and internal conversion (IC) electrons. Byproducts of the decay are Auger and Coster-Kronig (ACK) electrons and X-rays, prompted by vacancies left by the IC electrons, for further explanation of gamma-transition see section ???. The Q-value (Q) is defines as the difference in mass before and after a nuclear reaction and represents the net energy released when the nuclei has decayed completely. This energy is distributed as kinetic energy among product particles. Due to the Gd nuclei's large mass, compared to a photon (massless) and an electron, the recoil energy is neglectable (Modern Nuclear Chemistry, page 219*). I.e. most of the Q-value is distributed among gamma-rays and IC electrons.

1.2.1 Reaction Energy Spectrum

The excitation energy is distributed among reaction products; 99% of the energy is carried by prompt gamma-rays and 1.8% by IC electrons [?,?]. The energy spectrum ranges from 0 to the Q-value of the nucluear reaction. Energies of prompt gamma-rays lie all over the spectrum, while energies of IC electrons and their biproducts are mainly located at the lower end, below 0.2 MeV.

The resulting spectrum is an overlap of two basic components. The first is a continuous spectrum generated by prompt gamma-rays, in the medium to high energy range. The second is a set of discrete lines produced by low energy prompt gamma-rays, IC electrons, Auger electrons and X-rays. In other words, prompt gamma-ray emission add to both the discrete and continuous component, while the remaining reaction products supply the discrete component. The spectrums form is closely related to the arrangement of Gds nuclear levels. Figure ? illustrates excited states of an arbitrary nucleus. A low lying level have less excitation energy than a high lying level. Low lying levels are easily distinguishable, each with a known spin and parity, they are discrete. As the excitation energy increases so does the nuclear level density, until high lying levels eventually become indistinguishable from one another and resemble a continuum. In fig. ?, the quasicontinuum domain of energy states is represented by a gradient, where energy level density increases as the gradient darkens. Energy levels within the quasi-continuum are marked by dotted lines and the discrete domain with uninterrupted lines. There is no clear boundary between the continuous and discrete domain, but rather a smooth transition between the two. The highest energy level represents neutron capture state and the lowest level ground state, both are indicated by a bold uninterrupted line. A transition from one level to another is indicated by and arrow.

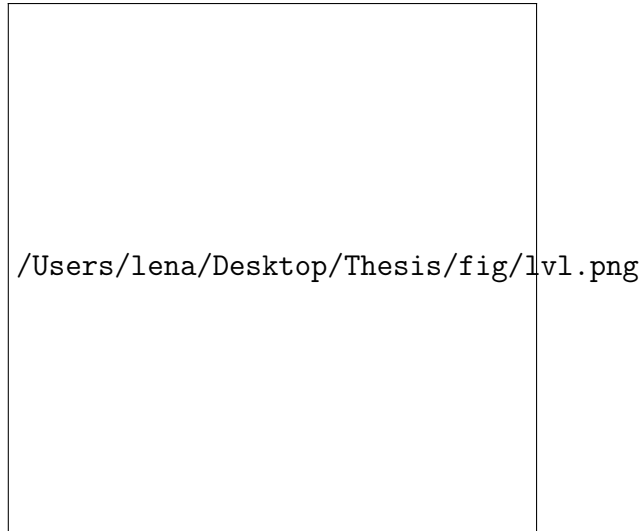


Figure 1.1: Nuclear levels of an arbitrary nucleus

Prompt Gamma-rays

A nucleus may transition once or several times before it reaches ground state. Transitions can occur between (1) states in the continuous domain, (2) states in the discrete domain or (3) between the two. It is the transitions from initial states in the quasicontinuum that bring about the spectrum's apparent continuity. Since there are endless state from which a nucleus can decay The domain has an endless number of states , thus giving the gamma endless possibilities of emission energies.

Internal Conversion Electrons

A competing process to gamma-ray emission is internal conversion (IC), the direct emission of an orbital electron. The relationship between the two decay-modes is expressed by the internal conversion coefficient (ICC) α . The coefficient is defined as the ratio of IC decay rate λ_{ICe^-} to gamma decay rate λ_γ :

$$\alpha = \frac{\lambda_{ICe^-}}{\lambda_\gamma} \quad (1.3)$$

In cases where gamma decay is preferred the coefficient is small, perhaps even negligible, and differently when IC is preferred the coefficient is large. The probability of IC depends on the electron shell (K,L, M, ...), there for each shell has its own ICC ($\alpha_K, \alpha_L, \alpha_M, \dots$) . The total ICC is the ratio of total number of IC electrons to gamma-rays emitted by a nucleus and it can be expressed as a sum of shell coefficients:

$$\alpha_{TOT} = \sum_i \alpha_i, i = K, L, M, \dots \quad (1.4)$$

Chapter 2

Semiconductors

2.1 Energy Band Diagram

An energy band diagram is often used to illustrate the conductive properties of an atomic structure. The vertical axis corresponds total energy of an atomic electron. The horizontal axis corresponds to the position in space in the atomic structure. Valence electrons have energies indicated by the valence band (bottom band). Free electrons that are responsible for conduction lie in the conduction band (top band). Fermi energy level represents the maximum electron energy at absolute zero temperature (0K) and lies in-between the two bands. In diagrams, the area within the bands are usually shaded to indicate allowed electron energy states. The energy bands may or may not overlap. In the latter case, there is a gap between the bands which contains forbidden electron energies. This gap it is called the band-gap. The width of the band-gap E is the difference between the lowest energy in the conduction band E_C and the highest energy in the valence band E_V . A valence electron must collect energy no lesser than E to enter the conduction band.

An insulator is a poor conductive material that does not conduct electric current. Its energy diagram shows that the gap between the energy bands are large. In fact, it is so large that electrons have great difficulty crossing the forbidden region and ever entering the conduction band. In contrast, a conductor is a highly conductive material that readily allows the flow of electric current. The valence and conduction band overlap and create a union. There is no band-gap and electrons may flow freely from one band to the other.

A semiconductor is a material whose conductivity lies between an insulators and a conductors. The conductivity depends on its temperature and composite material. Rising temperatures increase the kinetic energy of valence electrons and determine whether they have enough energy to leap over the band-gap and into the conduction band. At low temperatures a semiconductor behaves like an insulator and with increasing temperatures the conductivity rises, eventually resembling that of a conductor. The conductive properties can also be altered by doping the material with impurities. Such semiconductors are called doped or extrinsic semiconductors.

2.2 Doped semiconductors

When speaking about semiconductors, doping is the process of injecting impurities into the structure. Adding impurities to a pure semiconductor alters its electrical conductivity by introducing allowed energy states in the band-gap. These impurity states appear close to either the

conduction band or valence band depending on the impurity. The number of valence electrons of an impurity atom determines the doping type. Semiconductors in which added impurity atoms has an extra electron are n-type while those with impurity atoms an electron short are p-type.

The most common semiconductor material is silicon (Si). Silicon belongs in group IV of the periodic table and thus has four electrons in its outer shell. In a pure silicon crystal structure, the four outer electrons each form a covalent bond with a neighboring electron of another Si-atom. At thermal equilibrium the only accepted energy states are in the valence band. If sufficient energy, at minimum the band-gap, is transferred to valence electrons they may excite to the conduction band.

A neutrally charged phosphorous (P) atom has five valence electrons, one more than Si-atoms, and as an impurity in the Si-crystal lattice acts as an electron donor. Four out of its five electrons form covalent bonds with valence electron of neighboring Si-atoms. The fifth donor electron is left loosely bound to the P-atom and, thus, is more easily excited to the conduction band.

In contrast, a neutrally charged boron (B) atom has three valence electrons. While phosphorous supplies electrons, a boron impurity contributes to electron vacancies (or holes). The holes in the Si-structure acts as electron acceptors. Valence electrons may fill a hole and, in its wake, leave a new hole. One could also say the two charge carriers (interchange?) switch positions

Figure ?? illustrates the energy band diagram of doped semiconductors, p-type (right) and n-type (left). In p-type, donor state appears in close proximity of the conduction band and in n-type acceptor states and lie just above the valence band. The gap between an impurity state and the closest band is referred to as dopant-site energy gap and it is significantly smaller than the band-gap. Acceptor levels lift valence electrons slightly above the valence band and donator levels supply an electron in an energy state extremely close to the conduction band. Adding impurities lessens the energy required to excite an electron and consequently increases the materials conductivity.

2.3 Pn-junction diode

Combining extrinsic semiconductors of different type can create a diode, an electrical component which allows the easy passage of current in one direction but prohibits it in the other. The combination of a p-type and n-type semiconductor creates a pn-junction diode. The formation of a pn-junction can be seen in Fig. ?? A pn-junction is the interface between an n-type and a p-type. N-type have an excess of negative charge carriers (electrons) and p-type have an excess of positive charge carriers (holes). When two extrinsic semiconductors are joined the process of charge diffusion is set in motion. Electrons from the n-type drift towards the p-type and combine with positive charge carriers, while holes from the p-type make their way to the n-type and combine with negative charge carriers. Naturally an electric field (and a potential barrier) instantaneously forms and increases as charges accumulate in opposite regions near pn-junction. Once the potential barrier reaches an impassable magnitude the diffusion of charge comes to a halt and the system is said to have reached thermal equilibrium. The depletion region is the zone in a pn-junction where no mobile charge carriers are present and only ionized impurity atoms remain. In the depletion region, near the junction the p-type has a negative space charge region and the n-type a positive space charge region. The generated electric field only exists in the depletion region and points from n-type (positive region) to p-type (negative region) inside the depletion region. Thus, any charge carrier that may appear

in the semiconductor material moves with respect to the electric field inside the depletion region and by diffusion outside the depletion region. In other words, the pn-junction behaves like a diode, allowing current to flow freely in one direction while prohibiting it in the other.

2.3.1 Reverse Bias, Charge Collection and Pulse Signal?

An external voltage source (e.g. a battery) can change the properties of a pn-junction diode. Reverse bias voltage is created by attaching (+) pole to n-side and the (-) pole to p-side such that the electric field caused by the bias points in the direction of electric field in the depletion region. Electrons on the n-side are attracted to (+) and holes to (-). The free charge carriers are pulled even further away from the pn-junction. A reverse bias this increases the depletion regions width. Oppositely, a forward bias connects (+) and (-) to poles to p-side and n-side, respectively, and pushed charge carriers closer to the pn-junction. The depletion region width decreases.

The pn-junction diode described above combined with a reverse bias acts as a very simple semiconductor particle detector. A particle traversing the depletion region ionizes composite atoms and creates electron-hole (e-h) pairs which gives rise to a pulse signal indicating the ionizing particles presence.

A pn-diode is integrated in an electric circuit with the help of electrodes; an electrical conductor used to connect non-metallic components into circuits. By the basic physical phenomenon of electrostatic induction, a moving point charge induces opposite charge in a conductor. Electron-hole pairs are created along the track of an ionizing particle traversing the pn-diode. The presence of an electric field causes electrons and holes to drift towards respective ends of the pn-diode, each welded to an electrode. The moving charge carriers induces charge in the electrodes and are responsible for the pulse signal registered by readout electronics. The induced charge grows as charge carriers accumulate and comes to a halt once complete charge collection has been achieved. The charge collection time can be shortened (i.e. improved) by increasing the electric field strength. (Figure? Pulse signal?) In a pn-diode without a bias, there is only an electric field in the depletion region. Charge carriers in the depletion region are swept away by the local electric field and induce a pulse signal. In the undepleted region there is no electric field and charge carriers in this region are subject to charge recombination with majority carriers. Hence the induced signal owes its realization to charge generated in the depletion. With reverse bias the depletion region becomes larger and its local electric field increases. A larger depletion region means more signal inducing charge carriers can be produced. Since charge carriers in the depletion region experience a stronger electric field they accelerate and are, thus, collected faster.

As a particle detector the pn-diodes depletion region is considered the sensitive volume. It is the charge carriers produced in this area who are responsible for pulse generation observed by the readout electronics. The amount of charge and collection time thereof plays a role in the detector's sensitivity. A pn-diode coupled with reverse bias enlarges the sensitive volume, giving room for greater charge production and faster signal generation. Reverse bias thus improves the spatial, energy and time resolution of the detector.

