

⁴⁰K - Comments on evaluation of the decay data

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The initial evaluation was completed in 1998 [1999BEZS] and revised in 2009 [2010BEZQ]. The present revision was performed considering the literature available by end of May 2025. Datasets have been averaged with the LWEIGHT (*Limitation of Relative Statistical Weight*) program.

1. Decay scheme

Potassium-40 is a naturally-occurring radioisotope with an abundance of 0.011668 (8) % [2013Naum]. This radionuclide disintegrates by β^- emission to the ground state (level 0) of ⁴⁰Ca, by electron capture to the first excited state (level 1) of ⁴⁰Ar, and by a competing transition (electron capture versus β^+) to the ground state (level 0) of ⁴⁰Ar.

Recommended decay energies have been adopted from the latest Atomic Mass Evaluation [2021WA16]: $Q_{\beta} = 1310.91$ (6) keV and $Q_{EC} = 1504.40$ (6) keV. The level energy of the first excited state of ⁴⁰Ar has been deduced from the γ -ray energy. Total angular momenta and parities, and the half-life of the excited level of ⁴⁰Ar are from [2017CH09]. The decay scheme is complete, with all the levels in ⁴⁰Ar and ⁴⁰Ca below the decay energies being populated.

2. Nuclear data

The initial evaluation [1999BEZS] followed for the half-life the strategy proposed in [1990HO28], with some improvements. A lack of comprehensive measurements of ⁴⁰K decay at that time led the evaluator to consider all the experimental values of partial half-lives.

$T_{1/2}(\beta^-)$ and $T_{1/2}(EC, 1460 \text{ keV})$ were evaluated individually, whereby their recommended values served to establish the branching ratios in the decay scheme. Finally, all the measured partial half-lives were renormalized by the recommended branching ratios to build a dataset of total decay half-lives that was used to establish the recommended ⁴⁰K half-life. The same reasoning was followed in the later evaluation [2010BEZQ], including the total decay measurement from [2004KO09]. New studies have been carried out since then that call for a revision of this strategy in the present evaluation.

All the measurements compiled in [2010BEZQ] have been updated with the natural ⁴⁰K abundance from [2013Naum] and the number of ⁴⁰K atoms per gram of natural K. The latter quantity has been established to be 1.7972 (12) $\times 10^{18}$ from the average atomic mass of natural K, as determined to be 39.0983 (25) u from the atomic masses from [2021WA16] and the conversion factor of 1 u = 931 494.102 42 (28) keV defined in [2021WA16].

2.1. Half-life

The total half-life has been evaluated by considering only the experimental values that were determined from complete measurements of ⁴⁰K decay, i.e., both the beta and electron-capture branches. Both the original and updated values are given in Table 1. Measurements from [1949Floy],

[1950Faus], [1950Hout] and [1955SU38] are excluded by the Chauvenet criterion, while the value of [2004KO09] is superseded by the more recent studies from [2022KO22]. Measurements from [2002GR01] were not considered in the later evaluation [2010BEZQ], while the value of [1965LE15] has been revised with updated partial half-lives (see Section 2.2). The resulting dataset is consistent with a χ^2 of 0.30 compared to a critical χ^2 of 3.78, and the weighted average with the minimum experimental uncertainty has been adopted: $T_{1/2} = 1.2522 (27) \times 10^9$ a. The value from [2022KO22] has a weighting of 67%, while that of [2002GR01] contributes a weight of 30%. This recommended half-life is consistent with the value of $1.2533 (31) \times 10^9$ a from [2010RE06], which was obtained by a detailed analysis of the Fish Canyon sanidine standard.

Table 1 – Total half-life measurements

Reference	$T_{1/2} (\times 10^9 \text{ a})$	Update ($\times 10^9 \text{ a}$)	Comment
1949Floy	1.54 (39)		Excluded by the Chauvenet criterion
1950Faus	1.14 (10)	1.13 (10)	Excluded by the Chauvenet criterion
1950Hout	1.31 (7)	1.30 (8)	Excluded by the Chauvenet criterion
1950SA52	1.27 (5)	1.25 (6)	
1950Spie	1.18		No uncertainty – not used
1955SU38	1.25 (4)	1.23 (4)	Excluded by the Chauvenet criterion
1965LE15	1.266 (7)	1.253 (14)	
2002GR01	1.248 (4)	1.249 (4)	Re-analysed in 2022KO22
2004KO09	1.248 (3)	1.253 (3)	Re-analysed and superseded by 2022KO22
2022KO22	1.2536 (27)		
Recommended	1.2522 (27)	Weighted mean with minimum experimental uncertainty	

2.2. Branching ratios

The decay scheme is complete and, the transition probabilities are connected by:

$$P_{\beta^-} + P_{EC(0,0)} + P_{\beta^+} + P_{EC(0,1)} = 1 \quad (1)$$

A theoretical ratio of $P_{EC(0,0)}/P_{\beta^+} = 200$ (100) was necessary to establish the branching ratios in earlier evaluations, as estimated from the results of the LogFT code [1971GO40] which is unable to consider transitions that were defined as third forbidden unique. However, the BetaShape code [2019MO35, 2023MO21] has been developed in recent years, and made available to calculate this degree of forbiddenness correctly. Thus, $P_{EC(0,0)}/P_{\beta^+} = 211.8$ (24) is predicted for the ⁴⁰K third forbidden unique transition based on the AME2020 Q_{EC} -value.

The recent measurement of the ratio $P_{EC(0,0)}/P_{EC(0,1)}$ provides the means of building a full decay scheme directly from experimental information only, which is judged to be a more robust approach. Rearranging Eq. (1):

$$1/P_{EC(0,1)} = 1 + P_{EC(0,0)}/P_{EC(0,1)} + P_{\beta^-}/P_{EC(0,1)} \times [1 + P_{\beta^+}/P_{\beta^-}] \quad (2)$$

The $P_{EC(0,0)}/P_{EC(0,1)}$ ratio was measured recently for the first time: $P_{EC(0,0)}/P_{EC(0,1)} = 0.0095$ (24), and has been adopted from this study [2023HA25, 2023ST09].

Three measurements are available to evaluate the P_{β^+}/P_{β^-} ratio: $1.3 (7) \times 10^{-5}$ given as an upper limit by [1959TI20]; $1.12 (14) \times 10^{-5}$ from [1962EN01]; and $1.5 (5) \times 10^{-5}$ from [1965LE15]. The

experimental setup of [1962EN01] was designed to minimize pair production, and explains the lower uncertainty of this work, while the upper limit from [1959TI20] has been considered in the present evaluation on the basis of the observed consistency with respect to the other two values. The recommended value $P_{\beta^+}/P_{\beta^-} = 1.15 (14) \times 10^{-5}$ corresponds to a weighted average, and the uncertainty is taken to be the minimum experimental uncertainty.

The $P_{\beta^-}/P_{EC(0,1)}$ ratio is identical to the ratio of the partial decay constants λ_{β^-} and $\lambda_{EC(0,1)}$. Measurements of natural or enriched sources have been mostly reported as specific activities in the literature, i.e., the number of counts per second and per gram of natural K. However, partial decay constants or partial half-lives were only given in some cases. When possible, all available results have been re-calculated as specific activities, and updated as explained previously.

Table 2 lists all the measured specific β^- activities of natural K. The value of [1960EG01] was not used after being superseded by [1965LE15]. While the value of [1972Gopa] would be expected to supersede [1971Venk], the slightly later study in 1972 seems to be of lesser merit than the latter, an opinion also shared by [2001BE81] – thus, the measurement of [1971Venk] is preferred. Measurements from [1948Hirz], [1950Smal] and [1951Dela] have been excluded on the basis of the Chauvenet criterion. The resulting dataset of 19 values is discrepant, with a χ^2 of 2.34 versus a critical χ^2 of 1.93 that arise from the values of [1965BR25] and [1965LE15]. [1965BR25] does not contain sufficient detail of the uncertainties, and the original study is contained within an inaccessible PhD thesis. The uncertainty documented in [1965LE15] is unrealistically low and most probably accounts for the statistical fitting procedure only. Therefore, these uncertainties have been increased to the minimum required to make the dataset consistent (χ^2 of 1.92): 29.2 (5) becomes 29.2 (10) for [1965BR25]; and 28.26 (5) becomes 28.26 (30) for [1965LE15]. The LWEIGHT program limits the contribution of [2022KO22] to 50% and recommends a weighted average with external uncertainty. The specific β^- activity calculated from this dataset is 28.04 (12) $s^{-1} g^{-1}$ of natural K, which corresponds to $\lambda_{\beta^-} = 4.924 (21) \times 10^{-10} a^{-1}$.

Table 3 lists all the measured specific γ activities of natural K. [1931Orba] did not quantify the uncertainty, and therefore has not been considered in the determination of the weighted average. Values of [1950Graf] and [1965LE15] supersede [1947GL07] and [1960EG01], respectively. [1956Weth] did not undertake direct counting measurements and therefore has been rejected, while the studies of [1949Floy] have been excluded on the basis of the Chauvenet criterion. The resulting dataset of 15 values is consistent, with a χ^2 of 0.90 versus a critical χ^2 of 2.08, whereby a weighting of 84% was assigned to the value of [1977CE04], as also noted by [2001BE81]. Therefore, the decision was made to increase the uncertainty of [1977CE04] close to the level of the second most precise value of the dataset from [2022KO22]: 3.210 (10) increased to 3.210 (30). The dataset is still consistent (χ^2 of 0.78) with equivalent weightings for [1977CE04] and [2022KO22] of 36% and 39%, respectively, along with the adoption of the internal uncertainty. The specific γ activity is then 3.237 (18) $s^{-1} g^{-1}$ of natural K, which corresponds to $\lambda_{EC(0,1)} = 5.684 (32) \times 10^{-11} a^{-1}$.

The ratio of the partial decay constants gives $P_{\beta^-}/P_{EC(0,1)} = 8.66 (6)$. The branching ratios have then been deduced: $P_{\beta^-} = 89.56 (7) \%$; $P_{EC(0,1)} = 10.34 (7) \%$; $P_{EC(0,0)} = 0.098 (25) \%$; $P_{\beta^+} = 0.00103 (13) \%$. Notably, the capture probability to the ground state of ⁴⁰Ar is half the value determined in the earlier evaluation [2010BEZQ]. The corresponding capture-to-positron ration is $P_{EC(0,0)}/P_{\beta^+} = 95 (27)$, which is half of the value predicted by the BetaShape code. This inaccuracy of the theoretical prediction may be due to the atomic modelling, as recently studied by [2024Ando].

The total decay half-life corresponds to the decay constant $\lambda_{tot} = 5.535 (12) \times 10^{-10} a^{-1}$. The

recommended partial decay constants have been deduced using the branching ratios established above: $\lambda_{\beta} = 4.958 (11) \times 10^{-10} \text{ a}^{-1}$; $\lambda_{\text{EC}} = 5.778 (13) \times 10^{-11} \text{ a}^{-1}$; and $\lambda_{\text{EC}(0,1)} = 5.723 (38) \times 10^{-11} \text{ a}^{-1}$. While the decay constants λ_{β} and $\lambda_{\text{EC}(0,1)}$ are not identical to those determined above because their datasets have been assembled from different experiments, their ratios are identical. Finally, the following specific activities have been determined: **specific β^{-} activity of 28.23 (6) $\text{s}^{-1} \text{ g}^{-1}$ of natural K**, and **specific γ activity of 3.259 (22) $\text{s}^{-1} \text{ g}^{-1}$ of natural K**.

Table 4 summarizes the evaluated half-life and branching ratios and compares them with previous evaluations.

2.3. Beta transition

There is only a single β^{-} transition in the ⁴⁰K decay scheme that directly populates the ground state of ⁴⁰Ca. The transition energy corresponds to $Q_{\beta} = 1310.91 (6) \text{ keV}$. As evaluated in Section 2.2, the branching ratio is 89.56 (7) %. The average spectrum energy $E_{\beta^{-}} = 582.898 (26) \text{ keV}$ and the $\log ft = 20.5935 (11)$ value have been calculated by means of the BetaShape code version 2.4 [2023MO21]. This program also provides an average spectrum energy of 583.913 (26) keV as determined from the spectrum of [1965LE15] measured from 100 to 1100 keV. Both mean energies are in good agreement to within less than 0.2%.

2.4. Electron capture transitions

The electron-capture transition from the ⁴⁰K ground state to the first excited state of ⁴⁰Ar is first forbidden unique, with a transition energy of 43.55 (6) keV deduced from $Q_{\text{EC}} = 1504.40 (6) \text{ keV}$ and a level energy of $E_1(^{40}\text{Ar}) = 1460.851 (6) \text{ keV}$, as determined in Section 2.5. Relative capture probabilities P_K , P_L , etc. and the $\log ft = 11.536 (8)$ value have been calculated by means of the BetaShape code version 2.4 [2019MO35].

The electron-capture transition to the ground state of ⁴⁰Ar is third forbidden unique. The transition energy corresponds to Q_{EC} , and a β^{+} transition competes with a transition energy of $(Q_{\text{EC}} - 2 m_e c^2) = 482.40 (6) \text{ keV}$ in which the electron mass has been taken from [2024Mohr]. Calculations of the relative capture probabilities and $\log ft$ values has been performed with BetaShape enforcing maintenance of the evaluated branching ratios to prevent update of the balance between $P_{\text{EC}(0,0)}$ and $P_{\beta^{+}}$. The average spectrum energy is $E_{\beta^{+}} = 251.757 (28) \text{ keV}$. Total $\log ft = 21.64 (11)$ is dominated by the electron-capture component that exhibits $\log f_{\text{EC}} = 2.0325 (49)$, while the β^{+} component is similarly defined by $\log f_{\beta^{+}} = -0.28302 (45)$.

Table 2 – Specific β^- activities of one gram of natural K

Reference	Counts (s ⁻¹)	Comment
1948Graf	26.8 (12)	
1948Hirz	34 (6)	Excluded by the Chauvenet criterion.
1949Stou	30.6 (20)	
1949Floy	27.8 (26)	
1950SA52	28.3 (10)	
1950Faus	31.2 (30)	
1950Hout	27.1 (15)	
1950Smal	22.5 (7)	In [1957WE43]; Excluded by the Chauvenet criterion.
1951Dela	32.0 (30)	In [1957WE43]; Excluded by the Chauvenet criterion.
1951GO29	27.1 (6)	In [1957WE43].
1955SU38	29.6 (7)	
1955KO21	29.2 (10)	
1956MC20	27.50 (30)	
1959KE26	27.2 (5)	
1960EG01	28.5 (14)	Superseded by [1965LE15] – not used.
1960SA31	28.8 (9)	In [1972Gopa] and [1990HO28].
1961GL07	28.20 (30)	In [1965BR25].
1962FL05	27.20 (30)	Uncertainty extended with 1.5% dispersion given in the publication, and rectangular uncertainty.
1965BR25	29.2 (5)	Uncertainty increased to 29.2 (10).
1965LE15	28.26 (5)	Uncertainty increased to 28.26 (30).
1966FE09	27.90 (30)	
1971Venk	30.2 (13)	
1972Gopa	35.0 (20)	Same authors as [1971Venk] but measurement of inferior quality (see also [2001Be81]) – not used.
2022KO22	28.20 (7)	Weighting limited to 50% by LWEIGHT.
Evaluated from dataset	28.04 (12)	Weighted mean with external uncertainty.
Recommended	28.23 (6)	From half-life and branching ratios.

Table 3 – Specific γ activities of one gram of natural K

Reference	Counts (s ⁻¹)	Comment
1931Orba	79	In [1990HO28], no uncertainty and discrepant at more than 5 σ – not used.
1947GL07	3.6 (8)	Superseded by [1950Graf] – not used.
1948Ahre	3.4 (5)	Recalculated with current γ -ray energy – original uncertainty unrealistic. Adopted uncertainty is from [1950Graf]: same method, but much more details provided.
1949Floy	1.20 (28)	Incorrect gamma efficiency: $I_\gamma/I_\beta = 0.05$ (1) was determined. Excluded by the Chauvenet criterion.
1949Sawy	2.88 (30)	In [1957WE43].
1950Graf	3.4 (5)	
1950Hout	3.10 (30)	
1950Faus	3.60 (40)	
1953BU58	3.37 (20)	Value depends on average energy of ion-pair production in air. Use of 32.5 eV while current value close to 34 eV – uncertainty doubled.
1955SU38	2.96 (30)	
1955BA25	3.50 (14)	In [1957WE43].
1956MC20	3.33 (11)	Keeping their specific β activity and taking their second, more robust value $I_\gamma/I_\beta = 0.121(4)$.
1956Weth	3.24 (15)	Not direct counting measurement – not used.
1957WE43	3.39 (12)	
1960SA31	3.21 (16)	In [1990HO28].
1960EG01	3.38 (14)	Superseded by [1965LE15] – not used.
1965LE15	3.20 (8)	Measurement of an enriched KCl source is more robust.
1966DeRu	3.25 (6)	
1977CE04	3.210 (10)	Incomplete uncertainty (see also [2001Be81]). Uncertainty increased to 3.210 (30).
2022KO22	3.240 (29)	
Evaluated from dataset	3.237 (18)	Weighted mean with internal uncertainty.
Recommended	3.259 (22)	From half-life and branching ratios.

Table 4 – Comparison of the half-lives and branching ratios from the different evaluations

Reference	$T_{1/2}$ ($\times 10^9$ a)	P_{β^-} (%)	$P_{EC(0,1)}$ (%)	$P_{EC(0,0)}$ (%)	P_{β^+} (%)
1999BEZS	1.265 (13)	89.14 (13)	10.66 (13)	0.20 (10)	0.00100 (13)
2010BEZQ	1.2504 (30)	89.25 (17)	10.55 (11)	0.20 (10)	0.00100 (12)
2017CH09	1.2480 (30)	89.28 (11)	10.67 (11)	0.045 (6)	0.00100 (13)
This evaluation	1.2522 (27)	89.56 (7)	10.34 (7)	0.098 (25)	0.00103 (13)

2.5. Gamma transition

The γ -ray energy has been adopted from the initial evaluation [1999BEZS] in which R.G. Helmer re-scaled his 1979 recommended value of 1460.830 (5) keV [1979HE13], down by 5.8 ppm following the methodology described further in [2000HE14]. This manipulation of the γ -ray energy results in $E_\gamma = 1460.822$ (6) keV. The recoil energy was determined using the atomic mass of ⁴⁰Ar corrected for the binding electrons [2021WA16], and the electron mass [2024Mohr]: $E_r = 28.67083$ (24) eV. The level energy was then deduced to be $E_1(^{40}\text{Ar}) = 1460.851$ (6) keV.

This γ transition is pure E2, and undergoes low internal conversion as a consequence of the small atomic number ($Z = 19$) and high γ -ray energy. The internal conversion coefficients have been calculated by means of the BrIcc program [2008KI07] within the frozen orbital approximation for the K, L, etc. shells: total internal conversion coefficient is $\alpha_T = 10.28$ (15) $\times 10^{-5}$, with the shell component $\alpha_{CE} = 2.87$ (4) $\times 10^{-5}$ and an internal pair-creation component α_π (1460 keV, E2) = 7.41 (11) $\times 10^{-5}$.

A γ emission intensity of $I_\gamma(1460 \text{ keV}) = 10.34$ (7) % has been deduced from the electronic capture probability (see Section 2.2) and the total internal conversion coefficient, although the latter contribution is negligible. The 511-keV γ -ray intensity is twice the sum of the β^+ emission probability and the pair creation from internal conversion: $I_{\gamma^\pm} = 0.00359$ (25) %.

3. Atomic data

Only the capture and conversion processes have been considered to create atomic vacancies in the present evaluation of ⁴⁰K decay. Thus, the atomic data are related to Ar element only.

Fluorescence yield data, relative K X-ray emission probabilities and ratios $P(\text{KLX})/P(\text{KLL})$ and $P(\text{KXY})/P(\text{KLL})$ are from Schönfeld *et al.* [1996SC06]. Auger electron and X-ray absolute probabilities have been determined from the related decay data by means of the EMISSION program [2000SC47]. Table 5 summarizes the absolute photon emission intensities obtained for the ⁴⁰K decay, including X-rays.

4. Consistency

The consistency of the recommended data has been checked by Saisinuc calculations [2008DUZX] of the total average energy emitted per decay mode for all emissions involved in the ⁴⁰K decay process, including atomic processes:

- resulting total emission energy of electron-capture branch: $Q_{EC} \times P_{EC} = 157.0$ (11) keV;
- resulting total emission energy of β^- branch: $Q_{\beta^-} \times P_{\beta^-} = 1174.1$ (9) keV.

Both are in perfect agreement with the expected values of 157.0 (11) keV and 1174.1 (9) keV, respectively.

Table 5 – Energies and absolute intensities of photon emissions.

Origin	Energy (keV)	Absolute intensity (%)
XL (Ar)	0.220 – 0.311	0.0034 (7)
XK _{α2} (Ar)	2.956	0.286 (8)
XK _{α1} (Ar)	2.958	0.567 (14)
XK _{β1} (Ar)	3.191	0.092 (4)
γ±	511	0.00359 (25)
γ _{1,0} (Ar)	1460.822 (6)	10.34 (7)

5. Recommendation of measurements

Any further improvement of the uncertainties on P_{β^-} and $P_{EC(0,1)}$ would require a high-precision measurement of the specific β^- and γ activities, which currently have relative uncertainties of 0.21% and 0.68%, respectively. Focusing on the specific γ activity would be more beneficial, whereby reduction in the uncertainty by a factor of three, down to the level of the specific β^- activity, would reduce the uncertainties of P_{β^-} and $P_{EC(0,1)}$ by a factor of two.

Knowledge of the branching ratio to the ground state of ⁴⁰Ar is essentially based on a single measurement of the electron-capture component by [2023HA25, 2023ST09] and of the β^+ emission by [1962EN01]. These two measurements are difficult to perform, especially with ⁴⁰K sources made of natural K. Nevertheless, new measurements are strongly recommended to help improve both the accuracy and uncertainties in the ⁴⁰K decay scheme.

6. References

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