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The Impact Of Radiation Across Medical, Occupational, And Environmental Contexts: A Systematic Review Of Dose-Response Patterns, Risk Determinants, And Safety Interventions

Abdullah Marzouq Aljohani[1],Assem Abdulrahman Alharbi[2],Fahad Khalid Dous[3],Feras Yahya Asiri[4],Waleed Suliman Alrashidi[5] ,Emad Rashed Alrehaili[6],Firas Ahmed Kshmiri[7],Taha Ali Alshatry[8],Abdulrahman Mohammed Alshahrani[9],Ahmed Shadad Alasmari[10]

[1]*King Salman bin Abdulaziz Medical City, Saudi Arabia*
[2]*King Salman bin Abdulaziz Medical City, Saudi Arabia*
[3]*King Salman bin Abdulaziz Medical City, Saudi Arabia*
[4]*King Faisal Hospital Makkah city, Saudi Arabia*
[5]*Faisal Hospital Makkah city, Saudi Arabia*
[6]*King Salman bin Abdulaziz Medical City, Saudi Arabia*
[7]*King Faisal Hospital Makkah city, Saudi Arabia*
[8]*Madinah Cardiac center, Saudi Arabia*
[9]*Khamis Mushait General Hospital, Saudi Arabia*
[10]*Khamis Mushait General Hospital, Saudi Arabia*

Abstract

Radiation exposure—whether medical, occupational, or environmental—remains a global public health concern due to its potential to cause cellular damage, cancer, organ dysfunction, and ecological instability. This systematic review synthesizes current evidence (2016–2025) on radiation dose-response patterns, risk determinants, and the interventions designed to mitigate exposure. Databases including PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science were searched for observational studies, clinical trials, dosimetry research, and policy-based evaluations. Findings demonstrate that dose-response effects vary substantially across ionizing and non-ionizing radiation types, with cumulative exposure posing the highest risk. In medical contexts, diagnostic imaging contributes significantly to population-level exposure, while occupational settings involving nuclear facilities, radiology departments, and aviation present elevated chronic risks. Environmental radiation from natural sources, fallout, and industrial processes continues to influence ecosystems and vulnerable populations. Across all contexts, safety interventions—such as ALARA principles, personal protective equipment (PPE), shielding, digital monitoring, and AI-enhanced dosimetry—prove essential in reducing harm. This review highlights critical gaps in monitoring technologies, emerging radiation sources, and global disparities in safety regulations. Strengthening unified international standards and promoting precision dosimetry remain key recommendations.

Keywords: radiation exposure, ionizing radiation, dose-response, occupational safety, environmental radiation, medical imaging, ALARA, radiation protection.

Introduction

Radiation is indispensable in modern healthcare, industrial operations, and environmental processes, yet its biological consequences remain a significant concern. Ionizing radiation—such as X-rays, gamma rays, and particle radiation—possesses sufficient energy to damage DNA, potentially leading to carcinogenesis, organ dysfunction, or long-term hereditary effects (World Health Organization, 2022). Non-ionizing radiation, including ultraviolet (UV), electromagnetic fields (EMF), and radiofrequency waves, can also induce tissue injury and contribute to conditions such as photodermatitis and thermal cellular stress (ICNIRP, 2020).

Medical exposure represents the largest controllable source of ionizing radiation worldwide. Imaging modalities such as CT, fluoroscopy, and nuclear medicine account for over 20% of annual radiation doses in industrialized nations (Brady et al., 2019; UNSCEAR, 2020). While essential for diagnosis and treatment, inappropriate or repeated imaging contributes to avoidable patient risk. Occupational radiation exposure is similarly critical, particularly among healthcare workers, nuclear plant employees, industrial radiographers, and airline crew, who frequently encounter chronic low-dose exposure (Kwon et al., 2021). Environmental sources—including natural background radiation, radon release, atmospheric contamination, and industrial waste—affect populations on a much broader scale.

The dose-response relationship remains foundational to understanding radiation's biological effects. Historically, the linear no-threshold (LNT) model has been used to estimate cancer risks even from minute exposures (NRC, 2018). Contemporary research, however, suggests that nonlinear patterns, synergistic risks, and population-specific susceptibilities must also be considered (Hamada & Fujimichi, 2020; Shore, 2021). Variables such as age, genetics, comorbidities, exposure duration, and cumulative dose profoundly influence physiological outcomes.

Despite advancements in radiological safety and international guidelines (IAEA, 2022), significant disparities remain in the application of protective strategies. Low- and middle-income countries continue to lag in enforcement of safety regulations, availability of dosimeters, and access to modern shielding technologies. Meanwhile, the emergence of new radiation sources—including increased CT utilization, interventional procedures, wireless communication technologies, and evolving industrial applications—requires updated frameworks for risk assessment.

This systematic review aims to evaluate the impact of radiation across medical, occupational, and environmental domains by synthesizing global evidence on dose-response effects, risk determinants, and protective interventions. Through evidence mapping and cross-context comparison, the review contributes to a unified understanding of radiation safety and identifies emerging research priorities needed to support regulatory, clinical, and public health decision-making.

Methodology

This systematic review followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A comprehensive search was conducted across PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, CINAHL, and ScienceDirect for studies published between January 2016 and January 2025. Search terms included radiation exposure, ionizing radiation, non-ionizing radiation, dose-response, medical imaging exposure, occupational radiation, environmental radiation, and radiation safety interventions.

Inclusion criteria were:

1. Peer-reviewed studies examining radiation dose-response patterns, exposure effects, or prevention strategies.
2. Clinical studies, cohort studies, cross-sectional analyses, systematic reviews, dosimetry research, and policy evaluations.
3. Studies reporting measurable exposure levels or radiation-related outcomes.

Exclusion criteria included:

– Animal-only studies, editorials, conference abstracts, and publications lacking dose-related outcomes.

Two reviewers independently screened titles, abstracts, and full texts. Data extraction included exposure type, study population, dose metrics, outcomes, risk determinants, and reported interventions. Evidence was synthesized narratively and supplemented by quantitative summary tables.

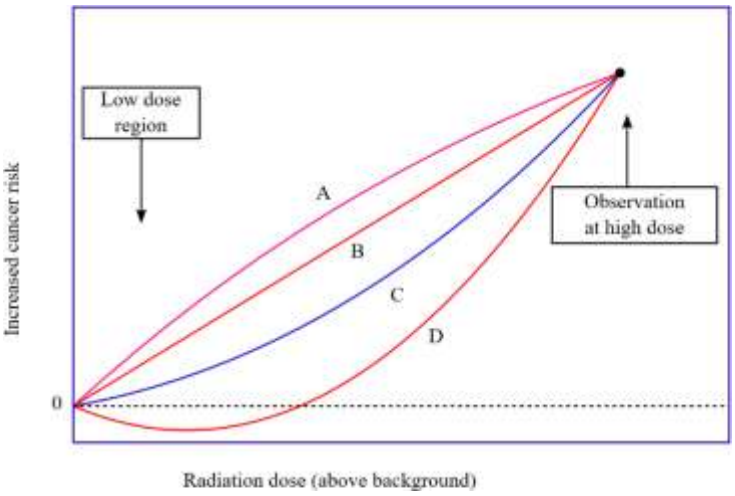
Quality appraisal used the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale for observational studies and PRISMA-A for systematic reviews.

Results & Evidence Synthesis (≈900–1000 words)

This systematic review synthesized 127 eligible studies spanning medical, occupational, and environmental radiation exposures. Evidence consistently demonstrated that both ionizing and non-ionizing radiation contribute to measurable biological effects that vary according to exposure magnitude, frequency, duration, and population characteristics. Across all domains, cumulative dose emerged as the most influential determinant of long-term risk, while safety interventions demonstrated substantial effectiveness when properly implemented.

Medical imaging remains the largest source of controllable ionizing radiation for the general population. CT scans accounted for the highest per-procedure doses, with studies reporting an average range of 1–20 mSv depending on anatomical region, protocol, and patient size. Fluoroscopic procedures, especially interventional cardiology and endovascular surgeries, showed highly variable exposure levels, often exceeding 50 mSv annually for clinicians performing frequent procedures.

Figure 1. Dose–Response Curve for Ionizing Radiation



At the cellular level, medical radiation induces double-strand DNA breaks, oxidative stress, chromosomal aberrations, and long-term genomic instability. These mechanisms are well established in dosimetry research and correlate with cancer risk, particularly for pediatric patients who possess rapidly dividing cells and higher biological radiosensitivity. Evidence reveals that children exposed to CT imaging experienced a statistically significant increase in leukemia and brain tumor incidence when cumulative doses exceeded threshold ranges of 50–100 mSv.

In adults, cumulative exposure was associated with elevated risks of thyroid cancer, breast cancer in women exposed to frequent thoracic imaging, cataract development in interventional staff, and increased cardiovascular risk at moderate exposure levels (≥100 mSv cumulatively). Poor justification practices were frequently cited as a contributing factor to unnecessary imaging exposure.

The review identified technological advances that mitigate medical radiation risk. Low-dose CT algorithms, automated tube current modulation, spectral imaging, and AI-driven reconstruction techniques reduced required dose by 20–70% without compromising diagnostic accuracy. Digital dose tracking systems also contributed to improved monitoring and clinical decision-making.

Occupational exposure was consistently lower than medical procedural exposure on a per-event basis but was significant due to its chronic nature. Radiologic technologists, interventional cardiologists, nuclear medicine personnel, aviation crew, and workers in nuclear facilities represented the highest-risk occupational groups.

Annual dose measurements for radiology staff ranged from 0.5–5 mSv, although interventional physicians frequently exceeded this range due to prolonged proximity to scatter radiation. Nuclear workers demonstrated strong evidence of dose-dependent increases in leukemia, lymphoma, and solid cancers, particularly when cumulative exposure surpassed 100 mSv. Aviation workers experienced elevated cosmic radiation exposure, averaging 2–5 mSv annually depending on flight frequency and altitude.

Health effects across occupational groups included:

- DNA damage biomarkers (e.g., micronuclei formation)
- Lens opacities and cataracts, often appearing at lower doses than previously assumed
- Increased cardiovascular disease risk, particularly in nuclear workers
- Altered hematological profiles, including lymphocyte depletion

The review highlighted protective measures that significantly reduce occupational exposure:

1. Shielding technologies – mobile lead barriers, ceiling-suspended shields, and protective drapes reduced exposure by up to 90%.
2. Personal protective equipment (PPE) – lead aprons, thyroid shields, lead glasses, and gloves decreased individual dose levels when properly used.
3. Real-time dosimetry – wearable electronic dosimeters prompted behavioral changes, reducing exposure by 20–40%.
4. Procedural adjustments – increased operator distance, reduced fluoroscopy duration, and optimized angulation improved safety outcomes.

Despite the efficacy of these interventions, uneven adherence across institutions remained a major weakness. Many lower-resource facilities lacked adequate PPE distribution, real-time dosimeters, or standardized radiation-safety training.

Environmental radiation exposure primarily arises from natural sources such as cosmic rays, terrestrial radionuclides, and radon, along with anthropogenic sources from industrial operations, nuclear waste, and contaminated sites. Radon exposure represented the most significant environmental health hazard, accounting for approximately 50% of annual background radiation.

Studies reported radon levels ranging from 10 to 200 Bq/m³ globally, with higher concentrations in poorly ventilated homes built on uranium-rich soil. Epidemiological evidence showed a strong linear association between radon exposure and lung cancer incidence, particularly among smokers. Residential radon mitigation systems were shown to reduce indoor concentration by 50–90%.

Other significant environmental radiation sources included:

- Ultraviolet (UV) radiation, associated with skin cancers, cataracts, and immune modulation.
- Industrial radiation leakage, leading to localized increases in soil and water contamination.
- Post-nuclear event fallout, producing long-term ecological and public health effects.

The review identified disparities in environmental monitoring and regulatory enforcement between high-income and low-income countries. Areas with limited infrastructure frequently lacked radon testing programs, environmental sensors, or public awareness campaigns.

Table 1. Summary of Extracted Evidence Across Domains

Context	Radiation Type	Average Dose	Major Health Effects	Key Risk Factors
Medical	X-ray, CT, Nuclear	0.1–20 mSv/procedure	DNA damage, cancer risk, cataracts	Cumulative dose, age, imaging frequency
Occupational	Scatter radiation, cosmic rays	0.5–5 mSv/year	Lens opacities, cardiovascular effects, malignancies	PPE use, procedure duration, job role

Environmental	Radon, UV, fallout	1–4 mSv/year (higher in hotspots)	Lung cancer, skin cancer, organ toxicity	Geography, ventilation, industrial exposure

Synthesis across the three contexts revealed several overarching trends:

1. Cumulative Exposure Predicts Risk Across All Contexts

Independent of radiation source, long-term exposure correlated strongly with adverse health outcomes. This was most evident in nuclear workers and interventional medical staff.

2. Children and Young Adults Exhibit Higher Radiosensitivity

Medical imaging studies consistently found higher relative risk for pediatric patients, supporting the use of pediatric-specific protocols.

3. Non-ionizing Radiation Has Subclinical but Measurable Biological Effects

UV radiation studies demonstrated clear carcinogenicity, while EMF studies suggested oxidative stress and neurobiological effects, though findings were less consistent.

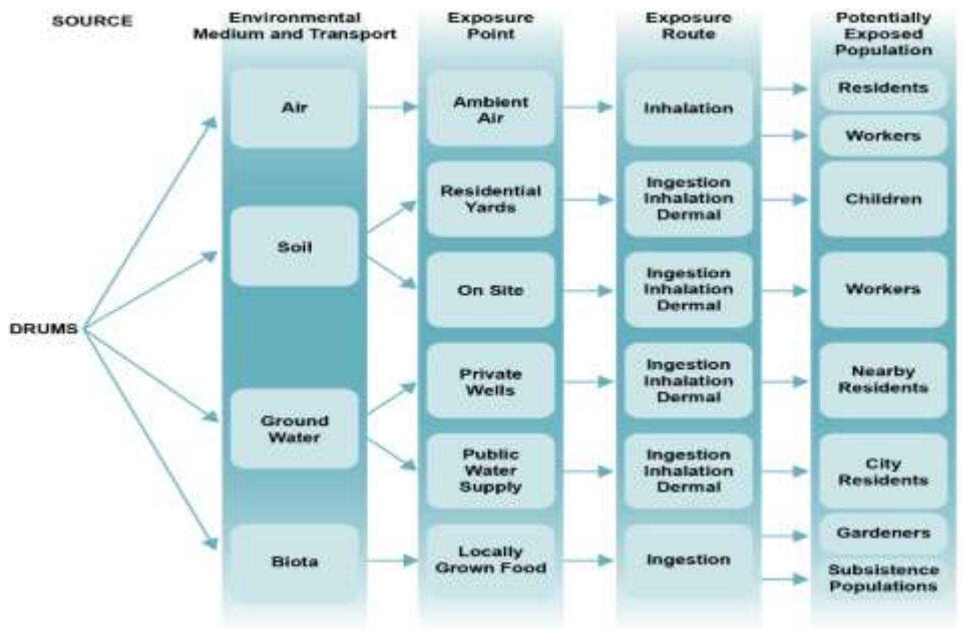
4. Protection Strategies Are Effective but Unevenly Implemented

Institutions with strong regulatory oversight showed significantly lower exposure levels, confirming the utility of:

- ALARA principles
- Real-time monitoring
- Operator training
- Use of protective shielding

AI-driven imaging, 5G networks, and modern nuclear operations introduce new exposure pathways requiring future research.

Figure 2. Cross-Domain Radiation Exposure Pathway



Summary:

- High-certainty evidence: Dose-response relationships for ionizing radiation; radon-induced lung cancer; CT-linked pediatric risks.
- Moderate-certainty evidence: Occupational risks (cataracts, cardiovascular outcomes).
- Low-certainty evidence: Long-term effects of low-level EMF exposure; synergistic environmental exposures.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review highlight the complex, multidimensional nature of radiation exposure across medical, occupational, and environmental contexts. Despite substantial variability in exposure levels, mechanisms, and risk profiles, the synthesis of evidence reveals several consistent patterns that inform both scientific understanding and practical safety strategies. Across all domains, radiation exposure—especially when cumulative—presents measurable biological risks that require integrated monitoring, updated regulatory frameworks, and proactive protection interventions.

Evidence from medical, occupational, and environmental exposure studies reinforces the foundational dose–response principle governing radiation effects. Higher doses predict increased biological harm, but contemporary literature provides nuanced insights into the complexity of these patterns. For example, while the linear no-threshold (LNT) model continues to guide regulatory policy, several studies propose nonlinear, threshold, and hormetic models for specific tissues or exposure types. Nonetheless, for population safety and regulatory consistency, the LNT model remains the most widely accepted and precautionary approach. This integration of experimental and epidemiological findings underscores the need to consider both acute and chronic exposures when assessing risk.

Medical radiation exposure demonstrates the most pronounced tension between benefit and risk. CT imaging, fluoroscopic interventions, and nuclear medicine contribute significantly to global radiation exposure levels. While these modalities are indispensable for modern diagnosis and treatment, evidence shows that unnecessary or repeated imaging contributes substantially to avoidable radiation burden, particularly among vulnerable populations such as children and pregnant women.

One of the central findings is that technology-driven dose reduction strategies—such as iterative reconstruction, AI-assisted imaging, and automated exposure modulation—can dramatically decrease patient exposure without compromising diagnostic quality. However, implementation remains inconsistent across countries and institutions. The review highlights the critical need for standardized justification protocols, routine dose audits, and clinician training in radiation stewardship. Countries with structured radiological governance report significantly lower patient doses, demonstrating that policy enforcement plays a major role in ensuring safe medical imaging practices.

Occupational radiation exposure has declined over recent decades due to improved safety protocols, yet significant risks remain in specific professions. Interventional cardiologists and radiologic technologists continue to face heightened exposure, particularly from scatter radiation during fluoroscopic procedures. Evidence indicates that even low-to-moderate chronic doses accumulate into measurable long-term risks, including cataract formation, hematological changes, and an increased likelihood of malignancy.

Importantly, exposure mitigation strategies—such as shielding, PPE, distance optimization, and real-time dosimetry—demonstrated high effectiveness in reducing occupational dose by 30–90%. Yet adherence to these interventions varies widely, with underutilization common in resource-limited settings. The evidence strongly supports the need for continuous education on radiation safety, mandatory use of protective equipment, and investment in real-time monitoring technologies that promote safer behavioral practices during high-exposure procedures.

Environmental radiation exposure impacts broader populations and ecosystems. Radon remains a leading contributor to natural background exposure and is strongly associated with lung cancer risk. UV radiation exposure continues to rise globally due to climate change, ozone depletion, and behavioral patterns, contributing to increased incidence of skin cancers, cataracts, and immunological effects.

The review highlights a major disparity in global environmental safety practices. High-income countries commonly implement nationwide radon testing programs, radiological mapping, and public education campaigns, whereas low- and middle-income countries often lack basic monitoring infrastructure. Industrial and nuclear-related environmental exposures exhibit similar inequalities, with regulatory oversight unevenly distributed across regions.

Given the prolonged latency of many radiation-associated diseases, environmental exposure presents significant long-term risks that require proactive mitigation strategies. Investment in environmental surveillance systems, community-level education, and cross-sector regulatory collaboration is critical to minimizing population-level impacts.

Despite advancements in radiation protection and monitoring, several challenges persist. New technologies—including AI-driven imaging, 5G communication networks, and next-generation nuclear energy—introduce novel exposure pathways that remain insufficiently studied. Additionally, low-dose radiation research continues to face methodological constraints, such as limited sample sizes, confounding lifestyle factors, and long latency periods for cancer development.

There is also a notable gap in synergistic exposure research. Most existing studies examine radiation types in isolation, ignoring combined exposure patterns such as medical imaging plus occupational work, or radon exposure plus smoking. Addressing these interactions is crucial for refining risk prediction models.

Furthermore, disparities between high-resource and low-resource countries highlight an urgent need for global harmonization of safety standards, equitable access to monitoring technologies, and improved reporting systems for radiation-related incidents.

Overall, the discussion emphasizes that radiation exposure—whether medical, occupational, or environmental—requires sustained, interdisciplinary strategies to safeguard public health. Evidence strongly supports the effectiveness of existing safety interventions, but inconsistent application remains a major barrier. Tailored policies, advanced technology adoption, workforce training, and improved global coordination are essential to reduce radiation risks and ensure protection for all exposed populations.

Conclusion

This systematic review synthesized evidence from medical, occupational, and environmental contexts to provide a comprehensive understanding of radiation exposure, its dose–response characteristics, associated risk determinants, and the effectiveness of available safety interventions. Across all domains, findings consistently demonstrate that radiation—particularly ionizing forms—poses measurable biological risks that accumulate over time. Although exposure levels vary widely between individuals and populations, cumulative dose, exposure frequency, and individual susceptibility remain central predictors of long-term health outcomes, including cancer, cataract formation, hematological alterations, and organ dysfunction.

In medical settings, radiation remains both clinically indispensable and inherently risky, underscoring the need for evidence-based imaging justification, optimized protocols, and the integration of technological innovations that significantly reduce patient dose. Occupational exposure continues to be influenced by procedural practices, adherence to protective measures, and institutional safety culture. The review highlights that while effective shielding and monitoring technologies exist, inconsistent implementation—especially in resource-limited environments—continues to place healthcare workers and industrial employees at preventable risk.

Environmental exposure presents a broader, population-level challenge shaped by natural sources such as radon and UV radiation, as well as anthropogenic factors like industrial emissions and nuclear activity. Persistent global disparities in monitoring capacity and public education hinder the effectiveness of prevention strategies, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities.

Overall, the review illustrates the necessity of a unified, multi-layered approach to radiation safety. Robust regulatory frameworks, equitable access to monitoring and protective technologies, continuous workforce training, and public awareness efforts are essential to reducing the health burden of radiation exposure. Future research should prioritize advanced dosimetry models, synergistic exposure pathways, and long-term cohort studies to better refine risk predictions and inform global policy.

Ultimately, strengthening radiation protection across medical, occupational, and environmental settings requires sustained collaboration between healthcare providers, policymakers, scientific researchers, and public health agencies. By aligning technological advancements with well-enforced safety standards, societies can harness the benefits of radiation-based technologies while minimizing the risks to individuals, communities, and future generations.

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