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Radiation Effects On Human Health And The Environment: A Holistic Review Of Exposure Sources, Biological Mechanisms, And Global Protection Standards

Ibrahim Hudaid Almutairi[1] , Nasser Abdulaziz AlQuraini[2] , Norah Oudah Alotaibi[3] , Abdulrhman Saad Aljomeai[4] , Abdulrahman Nasser Al-Mutawa[5] , Saad Abdullah Shuqayr[6] , Alanood Saad Altamrah[7] , Sager Alouraifi[8] , Abdullah Mohammed Aljomayie[9] , Abdulmajeed Mohammed Alarifi[10]

[1]*Abdulmonem alrashesd PHS, Saudi Arabia ihalmutairi@moh.gov.sa*
[2]*AlQuwayiyah General Hospital, Saudi Arabia naalquraini@moh.gov.sa*
[3]*Al-Muzahimiyah General Hospital, Saudi Arabia*
nooualotaibi@moh.gov.sa
[4]*AlQuwayiyah General Hospital, Saudi Arabia aaljomeai@moh.gov.sa*
[5]*AlQuwayiyah General Hospital, Saudi Arabia abalmutawa@moh.gov.sa*
[6]*AlQuwayiyah General Hospital, Saudi Arabia sshuqayr@moh.gov.sa*
[7]*Al-Muzahimiyah General Hospital, Saudi Arabia aaltamrah@moh.gov.sa*
[8]*AlQuwayiyah General Hospital, Saudi Arabiasalouraifi@moh.gov.sa*
[9]*AlQuwayiyah General Hospital, Saudi Arabia aaljomayie@moh.gov.sa*
[10]*Al Quwaiyah General Hospital, Saudi Arabia Abalarifi@moh.gov.sa*

Abstract
Radiation exposure—both ionizing and non-ionizing—remains a central global concern due to its widespread use in healthcare, industry, and communication technologies, as well as its presence in natural ecosystems. This holistic review synthesizes contemporary evidence on the sources of radiation, the biological and ecological mechanisms underlying exposure effects, and international protection standards developed to mitigate associated risks. The article explores medical diagnostic procedures, industrial emissions, cosmic and terrestrial radiation, and environmental contamination as key exposure pathways. It further examines cellular and systemic responses to radiation, including DNA damage, oxidative stress, carcinogenesis, and ecological disruptions affecting biodiversity and environmental integrity. Global protection standards, including frameworks from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP), and World Health Organization (WHO), are analyzed to evaluate their effectiveness in managing radiation hazards. Finally, critical gaps, regulatory challenges, and future directions in radiation governance are highlighted. The review concludes by emphasizing the need for harmonized international policies, enhanced public awareness, and technological innovations that balance the beneficial applications of radiation with robust safeguards for human and environmental health.

Keywords: Radiation exposure, ionizing radiation, non-ionizing radiation, environmental contamination, DNA damage, radiological protection, ICRP guidelines, public health risk, ecological impact, radiation safety.

Introduction

Radiation is an essential component of natural and human-made environments, and its effects have become increasingly relevant due to expanding technological, medical, and industrial applications. Exposure to radiation occurs through various pathways, including cosmic rays, terrestrial radon emissions, nuclear energy production, diagnostic imaging, radiotherapy, telecommunications, and industrial processes (UNSCEAR, 2020). While radiation has contributed significantly to scientific, medical, and economic advances, uncontrolled exposure presents a range of health and environmental risks that require systematic evaluation.

Radiation broadly falls into two categories: ionizing radiation—such as X-rays, gamma rays, and particle radiation—and non-ionizing radiation, which includes ultraviolet (UV) light, radiofrequency (RF) waves, and microwaves. Ionizing radiation carries enough energy to remove tightly bound electrons from atoms, producing ions and potentially causing severe biological harm. In contrast, non-ionizing radiation typically induces thermal or photochemical effects but is still associated with potential long-term health risks under prolonged exposure (ICRP, 2021).

Concerns about radiation risks intensified following historical events such as the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear accidents, rising public exposure to medical imaging technologies, and the global expansion of wireless communication systems. The biological mechanisms underlying radiation effects include DNA strand breaks, oxidative stress, mutation accumulation, and systemic inflammatory responses, which may result in cancer, cardiovascular disease, cataracts, and reproductive impairment (Little et al., 2020). Likewise, environmental radiation impacts ecosystems by altering soil composition, affecting plant and animal reproduction, and disrupting ecological balance.

Global regulatory agencies such as the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the World Health Organization (WHO) have established comprehensive models for risk assessment, dose limitations, and exposure monitoring. However, debates persist regarding acceptable exposure levels, long-term cumulative effects, and disparities in national compliance with international safety standards.

Given these complexities, a holistic review integrating health, environmental, and regulatory perspectives is critically needed. This article synthesizes the latest evidence on radiation exposure sources, associated biological and ecological mechanisms, and international protection standards. It aims to inform policymakers, health professionals, environmental scientists, and regulatory authorities about current challenges and future directions in managing radiation risks for both human and environmental wellbeing.

Methodology

This review adopts a systematic integrative methodology that synthesizes empirical, theoretical, and policy-related evidence on the impacts of radiation on human health and the environment. The process involved three major phases: literature identification, screening, and thematic synthesis.

A structured search was conducted across scientific databases including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Keywords used included “radiation effects,” “ionizing radiation health outcomes,” “environmental radiation impact,” “radiation protection standards,” “ICRP guidelines,” “radiation ecology,” and “public health radiology.” The search included peer-reviewed articles, systematic reviews, international reports (UNSCEAR, IAEA, WHO), and policy documents published between 2010 and 2025.

Studies were included if they:

1. Examined the biological, clinical, or ecological effects of radiation exposure.
2. Assessed radiation exposure pathways from natural, medical, or industrial sources.
3. Discussed regulatory or protection frameworks.
4. Provided quantitative or qualitative evidence relevant to human or environmental outcomes.

Exclusion criteria included:

- Non-English publications
- Studies with insufficient methodological rigor
- Articles focusing solely on physics or engineering without biological or environmental relevance

Data extraction followed a structured template capturing exposure types, radiation doses, biological endpoints, environmental outcomes, and regulatory implications. Themes were synthesized using a narrative integrative approach, enabling comprehensive interpretation across diverse disciplines.

The methodology ensures that the synthesized evidence is robust, interdisciplinary, and aligned with the review's aim of presenting a holistic perspective on radiation impacts and protection standards.

Exposure Sources of Radiation

Radiation exposure arises from a wide spectrum of natural and anthropogenic sources that vary in intensity, duration, and biological impact. Understanding these exposure pathways is essential for assessing population-level risks and designing effective protective strategies. Globally, humans are continuously exposed to background radiation from natural sources, while modern technological expansion has significantly increased artificial exposure—particularly from medical, industrial, and environmental origins. This section provides a detailed overview of the primary sources of radiation and examines their relative contribution to total exposure.

Natural sources account for the majority of total annual radiation exposure, contributing approximately 50–80% of the population's dose. These sources have been present since the formation of the Earth and remain unavoidable. One of the most significant contributors is radon gas, a naturally occurring radioactive gas produced from the decay of uranium in soil, rocks, and groundwater. Radon infiltrates homes and buildings, especially in poorly ventilated areas, and represents the leading natural cause of lung cancer after smoking.

Additional natural sources include cosmic radiation, originating from high-energy particles emitted by outer space and the sun. Exposure levels rise at higher altitudes and during air travel due to reduced atmospheric shielding. Terrestrial radiation arises from naturally occurring radionuclides such as uranium, thorium, and potassium-40 found in soil and minerals. Humans also carry small internal amounts of radionuclides absorbed through food and water, contributing to internal radiation exposure. Although natural radiation levels vary geographically, they form an intrinsic component of the global exposure profile and cannot be completely avoided.

Medical radiation is now the largest artificial source and one of the fastest-growing contributors to population exposure. Advances in diagnostic imaging and therapeutic radiology have improved clinical outcomes but increased exposure frequency and cumulative doses. X-ray imaging, including standard radiography and fluoroscopy, remains widely used for diagnosis. The proliferation of computed tomography (CT), which delivers higher doses compared to conventional X-rays, has been a major factor in rising medical exposure. CT scans contribute a disproportionate share of medical radiation doses despite representing a smaller percentage of total imaging procedures.

In nuclear medicine, radioactive tracers used in PET and SPECT imaging provide functional diagnostic information but deliver internal ionizing radiation. Radiation therapy, used in oncology, delivers targeted high-dose radiation to treat tumors; although therapeutic, it poses risks to non-target tissues and medical staff if improperly shielded. Despite these risks, medical radiation remains indispensable. Optimizing protocols, adopting dose-reduction technologies, and enhancing staff training are essential strategies to balance clinical benefits with safety concerns.

Radiation is widely used across industrial sectors, contributing to occupational exposure among workers in energy production, manufacturing, and security operations. The nuclear energy industry is a major source of occupational ionizing radiation, involving reactor operations, fuel processing, and waste management. Workers may be exposed to gamma rays, neutrons, and other high-energy particles, particularly during maintenance or abnormal events.

Other industrial uses include non-destructive testing (NDT), where radiation is used to inspect welds, pipelines, and structural components. Industrial irradiation is used for sterilizing medical equipment, food preservation, and material modification, all of which involve controlled exposure to gamma or electron-beam radiation. Additionally, mining and drilling operations may expose workers to naturally occurring radioactive materials (NORM), especially in oil, gas, and phosphate industries. Occupational standards aim to limit these exposures, but compliance varies by country and sector.

Environmental exposure can increase significantly following nuclear accidents, improper waste disposal, or radioactive contamination events. Historical incidents such as Chernobyl (1986) and Fukushima (2011) released large quantities of radionuclides into the atmosphere, soil, and water systems, resulting in long-term environmental and health consequences. Contaminants such as cesium-137, iodine-131, and strontium-90 persist in ecosystems, affecting vegetation, wildlife, and human food chains.

Table 1. Major Exposure Sources and Associated Radiation Types

Exposure Source	Radiation Type	Typical Dose Range	Primary Risks
Radon gas	Alpha radiation	Variable (depends on geology)	Lung cancer
Cosmic radiation	Ionizing (proton, muon)	Low–moderate; higher at altitude	Increased cancer risk
X-ray imaging	Ionizing (X-ray)	Low–moderate	DNA damage, cumulative cancer risk
CT scans	High-dose ionizing	Moderate–high	Increased lifetime cancer probability
Nuclear industry	Gamma, neutron	Moderate–high	Acute radiation syndrome, long-term cancer
Industrial NDT	Gamma, X-ray	Moderate	Occupational exposure injuries
UV radiation	Non-ionizing	Low–high	Skin aging, burns, melanoma risk
Telecommunications (RF)	Non-ionizing	Very low	Thermal effects; debated long-term risks

In addition to major accidents, smaller-scale contamination may occur through leaks from medical or industrial sources, abandoned radioactive materials, or improper disposal of radiological waste. Environmental radiation also becomes a concern in areas near uranium mines, nuclear facilities, and regions with naturally high background levels. Long-term ecological monitoring and strict regulatory oversight are necessary to manage these risks and prevent chronic exposure among affected populations.

Biological Mechanisms of Radiation Impact

Radiation interacts with biological systems through complex and multifactorial mechanisms that influence cellular function, tissue integrity, and long-term health outcomes. The nature and severity of biological effects depend on several variables, including radiation type, dose, dose rate, exposure duration, tissue sensitivity, and individual biological variability. Radiation is broadly classified into ionizing and non-ionizing, each triggering distinct molecular and physiological responses. Understanding these underlying mechanisms is essential for evaluating both the risks and therapeutic applications of radiation across medical, occupational, and environmental settings.

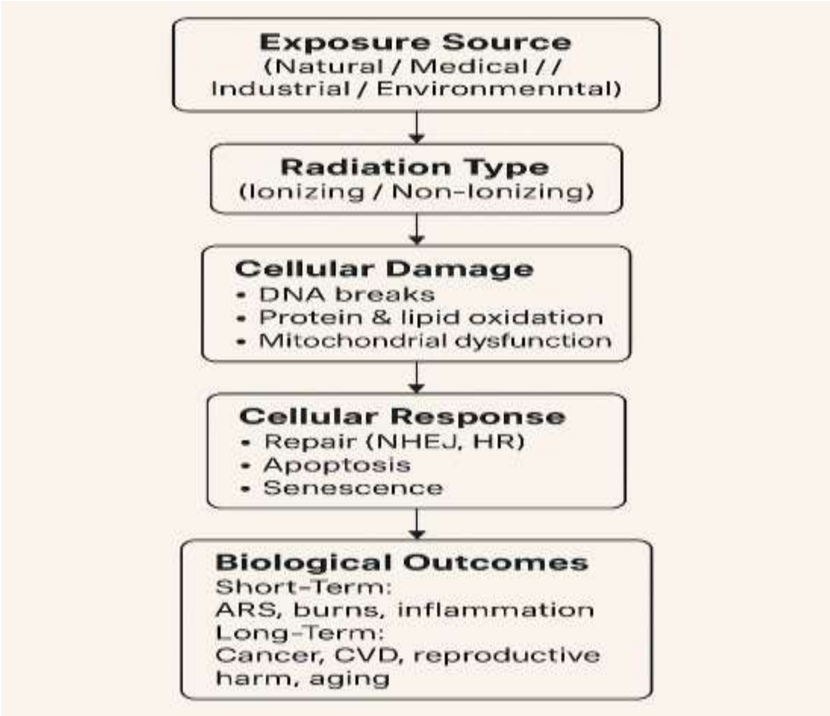

Figure 1. Conceptual Pathway of Radiation-Induced Biological Damage

Ionizing radiation, including X-rays, gamma rays, alpha particles, and neutrons, has sufficient energy to remove electrons from atoms and molecules, creating ion pairs that initiate a cascade of biochemical reactions. Its biological impact results from direct and indirect interactions with cellular components.

– **Direct DNA Interaction**

Ionizing radiation can directly strike DNA molecules, producing single-strand breaks (SSBs) and more critically, double-strand breaks (DSBs). DSBs are the most consequential lesions because they are difficult for the cell to accurately repair, potentially leading to chromosomal aberrations, gene mutations, and malignant transformation. Unrepaired or misrepaired DNA damage increases the probability of oncogenesis, explaining why ionizing radiation is strongly associated with cancers such as leukemia, breast cancer, and thyroid cancer.

– **Indirect Action via Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS)**

A substantial portion of radiation-induced biological damage arises from indirect effects, particularly through the radiolysis of water. Ionizing radiation interacts with intracellular water molecules, generating reactive oxygen species (ROS)—including hydroxyl radicals, superoxide anions, and hydrogen peroxide. ROS can diffuse and attack lipids, proteins, and DNA, amplifying cellular injury beyond the initial radiation track. Chronic oxidative stress contributes to aging, inflammation, and degenerative diseases.

– **Cellular Response, Repair, and Fate**

Cells employ multiple repair mechanisms, such as non-homologous end joining (NHEJ) and homologous recombination (HR), to correct radiation-induced DNA breaks. However, the fidelity of these processes varies and inaccurate repair can introduce mutations. If damage exceeds repair capacity, the cell may undergo apoptosis, necrosis, or senescence, each contributing to tissue dysfunction. Radiation exposure can also disrupt cell cycle regulation, impairing proliferation and increasing susceptibility to malignant transformation.

Radiation sensitivity differs across tissues. Rapidly dividing cells—such as those in bone marrow, gastrointestinal mucosa, and skin—are more vulnerable. High-dose exposures can result in hematopoietic suppression, gastrointestinal syndrome, and neurovascular collapse, collectively known as Acute Radiation Syndrome (ARS). At lower doses, long-term risks include fibrosis, cataracts, cardiovascular disease (through endothelial injury), reduced fertility, and teratogenic effects in embryos.

Non-ionizing radiation includes ultraviolet (UV) radiation, radiofrequency (RF) waves, microwaves, and extremely low-frequency (ELF) fields. Although it lacks sufficient energy to ionize atoms, it can induce biological changes primarily through thermal and photochemical mechanisms.

- **Ultraviolet Radiation (UV)**

UV radiation, particularly UV-B, can directly damage DNA through pyrimidine dimer formation, disrupting normal replication and transcription. If unrepaired by nucleotide excision repair pathways, such lesions increase the risk of skin cancers, including basal cell carcinoma and melanoma. UV radiation also induces oxidative stress, inflammation, and immunosuppression, contributing to photoaging and ocular damage such as cataracts.

- **Radiofrequency (RF) and Microwave Radiation**

RF and microwave radiation, produced by telecommunications and household electronics, interact primarily through thermal mechanisms. Absorption of RF energy increases tissue temperature, which can alter protein structures, enzyme activity, and cellular metabolism. While current evidence does not conclusively link RF exposure to cancer, ongoing research continues to examine potential long-term effects, including oxidative stress and changes in neuronal signaling.

- **Extremely Low-Frequency (ELF) Fields**

ELF fields, such as those generated by power lines and electrical appliances, induce weak electric currents in tissues. Although not directly damaging to DNA, ELF exposure is being investigated for subtle biological effects, including endocrine disruption and oxidative stress modulation.

Radiation-induced biological damage can manifest as immediate, delayed, or cumulative effects. Immediate effects occur at high doses and include ARS, tissue burns, and skin erythema. Long-term outcomes, often resulting from chronic low-dose exposure, include cancer development, cardiovascular disease, reproductive impairment, and accelerated aging.

Table 2. Summary of Radiation-Induced Biological Effects

Radiation Type	Primary Cellular Mechanisms	Short-Term Effects	Long-Term Effects
Ionizing (X-ray, gamma, alpha, neutron)	DNA DSBs, ROS generation, chromosomal aberrations	Skin erythema, ARS, cell death	Cancer, CVD, fibrosis, cataracts, reproductive harm
UV (Non-ionizing)	Pyrimidine dimers, oxidative stress, immunosuppression	Burns, tanning, inflammation	Melanoma, photoaging, cataracts
RF / Microwave	Thermal effects, enzyme alteration, mild oxidative stress	Tissue heating, discomfort	Uncertain; potential neurological and metabolic impacts
ELF Fields	Induced currents, endocrine modulation	Minimal acute effects	Potential oxidative stress; debated health outcomes

Ionizing radiation may also induce epigenetic changes, such as DNA methylation alterations and histone modification, which can influence gene expression across cell generations. Similarly, non-ionizing UV radiation causes immunomodulatory effects that alter skin barrier functions and systemic immunity.

Global Protection Standards

Global protection standards for radiation exposure represent the coordinated efforts of international and national regulatory bodies to safeguard human health and the environment from the harmful effects of ionizing and non-ionizing radiation. These frameworks aim to balance the beneficial uses of radiation—in medicine, industry, energy production, and scientific research—with the need to minimize associated risks. To achieve this balance, leading organizations such as the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the World Health Organization (WHO), and regional regulatory authorities have established evidence-based guidelines, exposure limits, and operational safety requirements.

The ICRP serves as the primary global authority for radiological protection principles, providing conceptual models and quantitative dose limits that guide national and institutional policies worldwide. Central to ICRP guidance is the optimization framework known as the ALARA principle—As Low As Reasonably Achievable—which requires minimizing exposure while considering economic and societal factors. The ICRP distinguishes between occupational, public, and medical exposure categories, each with specific dose constraints.

For occupational exposure, the ICRP recommends an annual limit of 20 mSv averaged over five years, with no single year exceeding 50 mSv. Public exposure limits are much lower, set at 1 mSv per year, reflecting the need to protect vulnerable populations such as children and pregnant women. In the medical context, the ICRP emphasizes justification and optimization, ensuring that every imaging or therapeutic procedure provides sufficient clinical benefit to outweigh radiation risks. The organization also provides specific recommendations for protecting patients undergoing pediatric imaging, workers handling radioactive materials, and the general population near nuclear facilities.

The IAEA develops comprehensive safety standards that member states adopt for managing radiation sources, nuclear installations, and radiological emergency preparedness. Its framework is built on three pillars: general safety requirements, radiation protection, and nuclear security. The IAEA supports countries in implementing effective national regulatory systems, conducting environmental radiation monitoring, and managing radioactive waste.

A key element of IAEA guidance is the establishment of graded approaches to radiation protection based on the magnitude and likelihood of exposure. This includes license requirements for facilities using radiation sources, safety assessments for nuclear power plants, and protocols for handling radioactive materials during transportation. The IAEA also plays a central role in coordinating international responses to radiological accidents, providing expertise, communication protocols, and rapid assistance missions to affected regions.

The WHO contributes to radiation protection primarily through public health policy, risk communication, and medical radiation safety. WHO guidelines address topics such as medical imaging optimization, UV exposure prevention, and communication strategies during radiological emergencies. In healthcare, the WHO promotes the principles of justification, dose optimization, and quality assurance, particularly in CT imaging and interventional radiology, which are among the highest medical dose contributors.

WHO also collaborates with IAEA and ICRP to develop joint frameworks supporting global initiatives such as the Radiation Safety in Medicine campaign, aimed at raising awareness among clinicians, radiographers, and policymakers about safe radiation practices.

While international bodies set overarching guidelines, national governments translate these into enforceable regulations. Examples include the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), European EURATOM directives, and Gulf-region authorities such as the Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation (FANR) and national radiation protection centers. These bodies enforce dose limits, licensing systems, workplace monitoring, environmental assessments, and emergency preparedness plans.

Variations in regulatory enforcement, technological capacity, and monitoring infrastructure result in discrepancies in global radiation safety. Low- and middle-income countries often face challenges in implementing international guidelines, especially regarding medical imaging oversight and occupational protection.

Discussion

The findings of this holistic review highlight the complexity and multidimensional nature of radiation exposure across human health and environmental systems. While radiation plays an indispensable role in medical diagnosis, treatment, industrial processes, and scientific advancement, its biological and ecological impacts necessitate rigorous oversight and continuous refinement of global protection standards. The integration of evidence from molecular, clinical, environmental, and regulatory domains reveals several key themes that warrant deeper consideration.

First, the biological mechanisms of radiation injury demonstrate that even low and moderate doses can trigger cellular and systemic responses with long-term consequences. Ionizing radiation, in particular, causes DNA strand breaks, oxidative stress, and chromosomal aberrations that contribute to carcinogenesis, cardiovascular disease, and accelerated aging. Meanwhile, non-ionizing radiation—especially UV radiation—remains a leading cause of skin cancer globally. These mechanistic pathways illustrate the inherent vulnerability of biological systems and reinforce the importance of minimizing unnecessary exposure, especially in populations with heightened sensitivity such as children, pregnant women, and immunocompromised individuals.

Second, the increasing global reliance on medical imaging technologies has significantly altered exposure patterns. CT scans, nuclear medicine, and interventional radiology deliver higher cumulative doses compared to traditional X-ray imaging. Although these technologies provide substantial diagnostic and therapeutic benefits, the rapid rise in their use raises concern about potential overexposure and insufficient dose optimization practices. This highlights the need for stronger clinical decision-support tools, standardized imaging protocols, and public awareness campaigns that emphasize the risks and benefits of medical radiation. Moreover, the expanding application of radiation therapy in oncology requires ongoing evaluation of treatment planning techniques to reduce collateral damage to surrounding tissues without compromising therapeutic efficacy.

From an environmental perspective, the long-term ecological consequences of radiation exposure are equally critical. Nuclear accidents such as Chernobyl and Fukushima demonstrate how large-scale releases of radionuclides can persist in soil, water, and ecosystems for decades. These events reveal gaps in global emergency preparedness, inconsistencies in environmental monitoring protocols, and challenges in long-term ecological rehabilitation. They also underscore the interconnectedness of human and environmental health, as radionuclides entering the food chain can produce chronic exposures across multiple generations. Current environmental risk models may underestimate the effects of chronic low-dose exposures on biodiversity, highlighting the need for more comprehensive ecological monitoring strategies.

The review also reveals major variations in the implementation and enforcement of global protection standards. Although the ICRP, IAEA, and WHO provide robust, science-based guidelines, national adoption remains uneven, particularly in regions with limited regulatory capacity or inadequate monitoring infrastructure. Low- and middle-income countries often struggle to implement dose limits, maintain radiation safety equipment, or enforce workplace protection protocols. These disparities contribute to global inequities in radiation-related health outcomes and emphasize the need for enhanced international collaboration, capacity-building initiatives, and technology transfer programs.

Another critical challenge lies in the uncertainties surrounding long-term effects of chronic low-dose radiation, particularly from RF and microwave sources. While current evidence does not conclusively link these exposures to major health outcomes, ongoing public concern requires transparent risk communication and sustained research efforts. Advances in genomics, radiobiology, and bioinformatics may help clarify dose–response relationships and improve predictive models for radiation risk assessment.

Finally, emerging technologies present both challenges and opportunities. Improvements in radiation shielding materials, artificial intelligence-assisted imaging optimization, automated dose tracking systems, and environmental surveillance platforms offer promising avenues for strengthening radiation protection. However, the rapid pace of technological development also necessitates continual updates to regulatory frameworks to ensure that new applications do not introduce unforeseen health or environmental risks.

Overall, the discussion highlights the need for a comprehensive, integrated approach to radiation protection—one that bridges scientific evidence, clinical practice, environmental monitoring, and policy implementation. A forward-looking strategy must prioritize global harmonization of standards, investment in research on low-dose effects, expansion of public education, and development of resilient systems capable of responding to radiological emergencies. By recognizing both the benefits and inherent risks of radiation, stakeholders can work toward ensuring that its use remains safe, responsible, and aligned with long-term public and environmental health goals.

Conclusion

Radiation remains an indispensable component of modern society, shaping advancements in medicine, industry, energy production, and scientific research. Yet, as this review demonstrates, its widespread use carries significant biological, clinical, and environmental implications that require ongoing scrutiny and responsible management. Ionizing radiation exerts profound molecular and cellular effects—ranging from DNA damage to systemic pathological outcomes—while non-ionizing radiation, particularly ultraviolet exposure, continues to drive global burdens of preventable disease such as skin cancer. Environmental contamination from nuclear accidents and industrial activities further illustrates the persistent, long-term consequences of radiological hazards for ecosystems and human populations.

The evidence underscores the critical need for balanced approaches that maximize the benefits of radiation while minimizing associated risks. International bodies such as the ICRP, IAEA, and WHO have established comprehensive frameworks to guide radiation protection, yet disparities in national implementation highlight the importance of strengthening regulatory capacity, standardizing monitoring practices, and promoting global harmonization. Ensuring equitable access to safe radiation technologies remains essential, especially for low- and middle-income countries.

Future progress in radiation safety will depend on continuous advancements in technology, including AI-assisted imaging optimization, automated dose tracking, and enhanced environmental monitoring tools. Equally important is sustained research on the long-term effects of low-dose and chronic exposure, which remain sources of scientific uncertainty. Public education and transparent risk communication must complement these efforts, empowering individuals and communities to make informed decisions regarding medical imaging, occupational practices, and environmental risks.

Ultimately, this review emphasizes that the safe use of radiation requires a holistic, multidisciplinary approach integrating biological science, clinical practice, environmental stewardship, and policy governance. By aligning scientific innovation with robust protection standards and international cooperation, the global community can ensure that radiation continues to serve as a powerful tool for human development while safeguarding the health of present and future generations.

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