

Figure 5.1. Distribution of stable and radioactive isotopes in a plot of atomic number (Z) versus number of neutrons (N).

The horizontal portion of the “stair steps” formed by the stable nuclides (filled squares) represents the number of stable isotopes for any given element. Notice that the number of stable isotopes increases with atomic number and that nearly all naturally occurring unstable nuclides are at the high end of the atomic numbers.

