First Results from CUORE: A Search for Lepton Number Violation via 0 Decay of $^{130}\text{Te}$

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First Results from CUORE: A Search for Lepton Number Violation via $0\nu\beta\beta$ Decay of $^{130}$Te


(CUORE Collaboration)
The existence of nonzero neutrino masses is well established by precision measurements of neutrino flavor oscillation [1]. This discovery has given renewed impetus to long-standing questions as to the Dirac or Majorana nature of the neutrino [2], the role of Majorana neutrinos in cosmological evolution [3], and the absolute neutrino mass. Neutrinoless double-beta ($0
u\beta\beta$) decay is a lepton-number-violating process that can occur only if neutrinos are Majorana fermions [4–7]. The discovery of this decay would unambiguously demonstrate that lepton number is not a symmetry of nature and that neutrinos are Majorana particles [8].

If it occurs, $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay has a robust experimental signature: a peak in the summed energy spectrum of the final state electrons at the $Q$ value of the decay ($Q_{0\nu\beta\beta}$). To maximize sensitivity to this signature, an experiment must have a low background rate near $Q_{0\nu\beta\beta}$, good energy resolution, and a large source mass. The Cryogenic Underground Observatory for Rare Events (CUORE) [9] is a new detector that applies the powerful macrobolometer technique [10,11] at an unprecedented scale to search for $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay of tellurium isotopes. In this Letter, we focus on 0νββ decay of $^{130}\text{Te}$ to the ground state of $^{130}\text{Xe}$. Our sensitivity benefits from the high natural abundance of $^{130}\text{Te}$, $(34.167 \pm 0.002)\%$ [12], and large $Q_{0\nu\beta\beta}$ of $(2527.515 \pm 0.013)$ keV [13–15].

CUORE is composed of 988 $5 \times 5 \times 5 \text{ cm}^3$ TeO$_2$ crystals [16], each having a mass of 750 g, which we can cool to temperatures as low as 7 mK. When a crystal absorbs energy, we exploit the resulting temperature increase to measure that energy. Each crystal is instrumented with a thermistor [17] to record thermal pulses, and a heater [18,19] for thermal gain stabilization.

The crystals are arranged into 19 copper-framed towers, with each tower consisting of 13 floors of 4 crystals. The crystals are held in the tower frame by polytetrafluoroethylene supports. The towers are arranged in a close-packed array and thermally connected to the mixing chamber of a $^{4}\text{He}\rightarrow^{4}\text{He}$ dilution refrigerator [20], which is precooled by five two-stage ($\sim 40$ and $\sim 4 \text{ K}$) pulse tube cryocoolers [21] and a Joule-Thomson expansion valve.
To suppress external $\gamma$-ray backgrounds, two lead shields are integrated into the cryogenic volume: a 30-cm thick shield at $\sim$50 mK above the detectors and a 6-cm thick shield at $\sim$4 K around and below the detectors. The lateral and lower shields are made from ancient Roman lead with extremely low levels of radioactivity [22]. An external lead shield (25 cm thick) surrounded by borated polyethylene and boric acid (20 cm thick) provide additional shielding. More details on the experimental subsystems and shielding can be found in Refs. [23–27].

A prototype detector equivalent to a single CUORE tower, CUORE-0, operated at Laboratori Nazionali del Gran Sasso from 2013 to 2015 and served to validate the materials and low-background assembly techniques used for CUORE [16,28–31]. Before the current work, the strongest probe of $\beta\beta$ decay of $^{130}\text{Te}$ came from CUORE-0 [32–35].

The data presented here are from two month-long data collection periods (datasets) which ran from May to June (dataset 1) and August to September (dataset 2) of 2017. Between the two datasets, we improved the detector operating conditions; in particular, we implemented an active noise cancellation system on the cryocoolers [36] and improved the electrical grounding of the experiment. The detector operating temperature is a compromise between minimizing the heat capacity of the crystals, thus maximizing the thermal gain, and optimizing the signal bandwidth. To select the optimal operating temperature, we performed a temperature scan to study the energy resolution achieved by a representative subset of detectors. An operating temperature of approximately 15 mK was selected for both datasets.

Each dataset is bookended by periods devoted to energy calibration with $^{232}\text{Th} \gamma$-ray sources [37]; the closing calibration is performed to verify the stability of the detector response over the dataset. We use the data collected between calibrations, which we refer to as physics data, for our $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay search.

The voltage across each thermistor is amplified and filtered [26,38–40] and continuously digitized with a sampling rate of 1 kHz [41–43]. A total of 984 of 989 channels are functioning. Thermal event pulses are identified by a software derivative trigger with channel-dependent thresholds ranging from 20 to a few hundred keV; we anticipate reducing these thresholds for future low-energy studies [44,45]. The rise and fall times of thermal pulses are on the order of 100 and 400 ms, respectively. We analyze a 10 s window consisting of 3 s before and 7 s after each trigger. The pretrigger voltage provides a proxy for the bolometer temperature before the event, while we determine the event energy from the pulse amplitude. The average event rate per detector is $\sim$50 mHz in calibration data and $\sim$6 mHz in physics data. In addition to triggered pulses, every few minutes each heater is injected with a stable voltage pulse ($\sim$1 ppm absolute stability) [46] to generate tagged reference events with fixed thermal energy. To monitor and characterize noise we also analyze waveforms with no discernible thermal pulses.

To improve the signal-to-noise ratio we use an optimal filter [47], which exploits the distinct frequency characteristics of particle-induced and noise waveforms. The pulse amplitude is determined from the maximum value attained by the filtered waveform. To monitor and correct for possible drifts in the energy-to-amplitude response of the detection chain (e.g., due to small drifts in operating temperature), which could otherwise spoil the energy resolution, we apply thermal gain stabilization (TGS) to each event amplitude. We apply one of two methods: the first uses monoenergetic heater pulses (heater TGS), and the second uses pulses induced by $\gamma$ rays from the 2615-keV $^{208}\text{Tl}$ calibration line (calibration TGS). Both methods were developed and used in CUORE-0 [33]. The heater-TGS algorithm is our default algorithm, while we use the calibration-TGS algorithm for the $\sim$3% of bolometers without functioning heaters and for channels in which the calibration-TGS algorithm yields a statistically significant improvement in sensitivity compared to the heater-TGS algorithm. In total, 96.6% of our exposure utilizes the heater-TGS method while the remainder uses the calibration-TGS algorithm.

To calibrate the detectors, we use six $\gamma$ lines from the $^{232}\text{Th}$ calibration sources ranging from 239 to 2615 keV. We estimate the mean stabilized amplitude of each line and create a calibration function for each bolometer in each dataset (each “bolometer–dataset”), which maps stabilized pulse amplitudes to physical energies. We find that the calibration functions of each bolometer–dataset are well described by a second-order polynomial with zero constant term throughout the calibrated energy range. After calibrating, to blind the region near $Q_{\beta\beta}$, we take events that reconstruct within 20 keV of the 2615 $^{208}\text{Tl}$ line in physics data and move a blinded fraction of them down by 87 keV; this procedure produces an artificial peak at $Q_{\beta\beta}$ [33] and is later reversed once the $0\nu\beta\beta$ search analysis is finalized. The calibration and unblinded physics spectra are shown in Fig. 1.

To select $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay candidates in the physics data, we apply the following selection criteria. First, we discard periods of noisy data caused, for example, by activity in the laboratory. This reduces the exposure by 1%. Next, we impose basic pulse quality requirements to each event, requiring a single pulselike feature in the event window and a stable pretrigger voltage. We then require the shape of each waveform to be consistent with that of a true signal-like event. We build a signal-like event sample in physics data from events that reconstruct within 10 keV of the $\gamma$ lines from $^{40}\text{K}$ at 1461 keV and $^{60}\text{Co}$ at 1173 and 1332 keV. We characterize event waveforms with six pulse-shape parameters and represent each event with a point in this six-dimensional space. We calculate the Mahalanobis distance.
we remove that channel from the subsequent analysis. The
selection efficiencies are summarized in Table I.

We establish the detector response to a monoenergetic
event near $Q_{\beta\beta}$ using the high-statistics $^{208}$Tl 2615-keV $\gamma$
line from calibration data. The CUORE detectors exhibit a
slightly non-Gaussian line shape, as was observed in
CUORE-0 [33] and Cuoricino [52,53]. The origin of this
structure is under investigation; however, we model it
empirically with a primary Gaussian component centered
at 2615 keV and two additional Gaussian components,
one on the right and one on the left of the main peak. We
find this model provides a better description of the data
compared to other models considered, for example, a
single- or double-Gaussian photopeak. The choice of line
shape is treated as a systematic uncertainty. The three
Gaussian components are parametrized with the same
bolometer–dataset-dependent width. The normalized line
shape function of each bolometer–dataset thus has 6
parameters: the means of the main peak and two subpeaks,
the relative intensities of the subpeaks, and the common
peak width. We estimate the line shape parameters for each
bolometer–dataset with a simultaneous, unbinned extended
maximum likelihood (UEML) fit performed on each tower
in the energy range 2530–2720 keV. The simultaneous fit
over a tower helps constrain common nuisance parameters
such as relative intensity of x-ray escape peaks and

We evaluate the trigger efficiency as the fraction of
tagged heater pulses that produce an event trigger. The
heater pulse amplitude is scanned to study the energy
dependence of the trigger efficiency. We also exploit heater
events to measure the basic pulse quality selection effi-
ciency mentioned above and the energy reconstruction
efficiency (i.e., the probability that a monoenergetic pulse
reconstructs correctly). The combined trigger, basic pulse
quality, and reconstruction efficiency, denoted by base
efficiency, is averaged over all channels with functioning
heaters and applied to all channels. In cases where a step
in the event reconstruction procedure fails for a channel,
we remove that channel from the subsequent analysis. The
selection efficiencies are summarized in Table I.

$$D_M$$ [48] for each event from the mean position of the signal
sample. We choose the upper limit on $D_M$ that maximizes
the discovery sensitivity [49]. Throughout this optimization,
data from the region of interest for $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay (ROI)
are not used. In calculating the figure of merit for a
given $D_M$ cutoff, we estimate the signal selection efficiency
from $^{40}$K events near 1461 keV and the background
selection efficiency from events with energy between
2700–3900 keV. Events in this latter energy range are
dominated by partially contained alpha particles and are
representative of the dominant background in the ROI.
Once the optimal $D_M$ cutoff is chosen, we evaluate the
efficiency of the pulse shape selection using events belong-
ting to the $^{208}$Tl 2615-keV line.

To reduce backgrounds from decays depositing energy in
multiple crystals (e.g., $\alpha$ particles on crystal surfaces or
multiple Compton scatters of $\gamma$ rays), we reject events that
occur within 10 ms of an event in a different bolometer
(anticoincidence selection). The width of the coincidence
window is chosen after correcting for differences in
detector rise times and trigger configurations that can
affect the time stamp assigned to an event. The interbol-
ometer time stamp differences are determined using
physically coincident multidetector events, such as pair-
production events occurring in calibration data. The energy
threshold for coincident events in the current analysis is
set to 150 keV. The anticoincidence selection efficiency has
two components: the probability for a $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay to be
fully contained in a single crystal and the probability to not
accidentally coincide with another event. We estimate the
former from simulation [50,51] and the latter we determine
using the 1461-keV $\gamma$ ray from $^{40}$K electron capture, which
is a single-event decay that is not expected to produce
physical coincidences.

We evaluate the trigger efficiency as the fraction of
tagged heater pulses that produce an event trigger. The

![FIG. 1. Reconstructed energy spectra of physics (blue) and
calibration (red) data. The calibration spectrum is normalized to
the physics data at the 2615-keV line. The sources of the labeled
peaks are identified as (I) $^{212}$Pb, (II) $^{228}$Ac, (III) $e^+e^-$ annihilation,
(IV) $^{208}$Tl, (V) $^{54}$Mn, (VI) $^{60}$Co, (VII) $^{40}$K, (VIII) $^{214}$Bi. Roman
numbers indicate the spectral lines used for calibration.](image)
continuum background. A simultaneous fit over the full array was not performed due to the computational demands. A comparison of the fit results with the calibration data and a breakdown of the fit model are shown in Fig. 2.

To characterize possible differences in the detector response between physics and calibration data, we fit prominent background peaks in the physics data, with known energies between 800 and 2615 keV, using the best-fit line shape parameters determined above for each bolometer–dataset. At each energy, this fit includes a dataset-dependent (i.e., channel independent) energy offset variable to parametrize the energy misreconstruction. In addition, as the calibration line shape study was performed near 2615 keV, each fit includes a dataset-dependent (channel independent) energy resolution scaling variable to parametrize energy dependence of the resolution or a difference between background and calibration resolution. We find the energy misreconstruction is less than 0.5 keV over the calibrated energy range. The best-fit resolution scaling parameters at 2615 keV are 0.95 ± 0.07 and 1.01 ± 0.06 for the first and second dataset, respectively. To parametrize the energy dependence of the resolution scaling, we fit the set of scaling parameters determined at each peak energy studied with a quadratic function. The resulting best-fit function is then used to estimate the resolution scaling at $Q_{\beta\beta}$. The exposure-weighted harmonic mean energy resolution of the detectors (denoted effective resolution) in physics data, extrapolated to $Q_{\beta\beta}$, is given for each dataset in Table I; to quote a single characteristic energy resolution for our entire exposure, we combine these, finding $(7.7 \pm 0.5)$ keV FWHM.

Before unblinding the physics data, we fix the model and fitting strategy to search for the $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay of $^{130}$Te. The ROI is taken from 2465 to 2575 keV. The model for each bolometer–dataset is composed of a $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay peak, a peak for $^{60}$Co coincident $\gamma$ rays, and a flat background. Each peak is modeled using the line shape described above, with the line width scaled by the resolution scaling extrapolated to the peak energy. All detectors are constrained to have the same $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay rate $\Gamma_{0\nu}$, which we allow to vary freely in the fit; the position of the $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay peak is fixed to $Q_{\beta\beta}$ for each bolometer–dataset. The $^{60}$Co peak position is a dataset-dependent free parameter; the $^{60}$Co rate is a single free parameter but the known isotope half-life is used to account for its decay. The background rate is a dataset-dependent free parameter and is not scaled by the event selection efficiency.

Figure 3 shows the 155 candidate events in the ROI that pass all selection criteria together with the result of the UEML fit described above. The total TeO$_2$ exposure is 86.3 kg yr, corresponding 24.0 kg yr for $^{130}$Te. The best-fit $\Gamma_{0\nu}$ is $[1.0_{-0.4}^{+0.3}(\text{stat}) \pm 0.1(\text{syst})] \times 10^{-25}$ yr$^{-1}$. With zero signal, the best-fit background in the ROI averaged over both datasets is $(0.014 \pm 0.002)$ counts/(keV kg yr).

To evaluate the goodness of fit, we prepare a large set of pseudoexperiments, each with a number of events determined by a Poisson distribution with a mean of 155 and energy distributed according to the best-fit zero-signal model. Repeating our $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay search fit on each of these, we find that 68% yield a negative log likelihood (NLL) larger than that obtained with our data.

We conclude there is no evidence for $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay and set a 90% confidence Bayesian upper limit on the rate,
TABLE II. Systematic uncertainties on $\Gamma_{0e}$ for zero signal (additive) and as a percentage of nonzero signal (scaling). The dots (\cdot\cdot) indicate the contribution of the corresponding entry is negligible.

<table>
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<th>Systematic uncertainty</th>
<th>Additive $(10^{-25}\text{yr}^{-1})$</th>
<th>Scaling (%)</th>
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<td>Line shape</td>
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<tr>
<td>Energy resolution</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fit bias</td>
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<tr>
<td>Energy scale</td>
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<tr>
<td>Background shape</td>
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<td>Selection efficiency</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.4</td>
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</table>

finding $\Gamma_{0e} < 0.50 \times 10^{-25} \text{yr}^{-1}$ (stat only) or $T_{0e}^{1/2} > 1.4 \times 10^{25} \text{yr}$. In constructing the posterior pdf for $\Gamma_{0e}$, we approximate the marginalized likelihood with the profile likelihood and use a flat prior for $\Gamma_{0e} \geq 0$. This approximation speeds up the computation and is valid when the marginalization is dominated by the most probable values of the nuisance parameters. We expect this for our likelihood as the number of events is large and the background dominates. To confirm this we perform an independent analysis using the BAT toolkit [54] with the same prior but marginalize over the nuisance parameters. The results agree with those above to the percent level.

We repeat our analysis on a large set of pseudoexperiments generated in the same way as for the goodness of fit study. We find the median 90% confidence lower limit (sensitivity) for $T_{1/2}^{0e}$ is $7.0 \times 10^{24} \text{yr}$, and there is a 2% probability of obtaining a more stringent limit than the one obtained with our data.

We estimate the systematic uncertainties following the same procedure used for CUORE-0 [33]. We perform a large number of pseudoexperiments with zero and nonzero signals assuming different detector line shape models and background shapes (flat and first-order polynomial), varying the energy resolution scaling parameters within their uncertainty, and shifting the position of $Q_{\beta\beta}$ by $\pm 0.5 \text{keV}$ to account for the energy reconstruction uncertainty. The results are summarized in Table II. We find the fit bias on $\Gamma_{0e}$ to be negligible. Including these systematic uncertainties, the 90% confidence limits are $\Gamma_{0e} < 0.52 \times 10^{-25} \text{yr}^{-1}$ and $T_{1/2}^{0e} > 1.3 \times 10^{25} \text{yr}$. A frequentist analysis, using the bounded method of Ref. [55], yields $T_{1/2}^{0e} > 2.1 \times 10^{25} \text{yr}$ at 90% C.L. with a median 90% C.L. lower limit sensitivity for $T_{1/2}^{0e}$ of $7.6 \times 10^{24} \text{yr}$.

We combine our profile likelihood curve with those from 9.8 kg yr of $^{130}\text{Te}$ exposure from CUORE-0 [32] and 19.8 kg yr from Cuoricino [56] (see Fig. 4). The combined 90% C.L. limits are $\Gamma_{0e} < 0.47 \times 10^{-25} \text{yr}^{-1}$ and $T_{1/2}^{0e} > 1.5 \times 10^{25} \text{yr}$. The frequentist technique yields $\Gamma_{0e} < 0.31 \times 10^{-25} \text{yr}^{-1}$ and $T_{1/2}^{0e} > 2.2 \times 10^{25} \text{yr}$.

We interpret the combined half-life limit, $T_{1/2}^{0e} > 1.5 \times 10^{25} \text{yr}$, as a limit on the effective Majorana neutrino mass ($m_{\beta\beta}$) in the framework of models of $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay mediated by light Majorana neutrino exchange. We use phase-space factors from Ref. [57], nuclear matrix elements from a broad range of models [58–68], and assume the axial coupling constant $g_A \approx 1.27$; this yields $m_{\beta\beta} < (110–520) \text{meV}$ at 90% C.L., depending on the nuclear matrix element estimate employed.

In summary, we find no evidence for $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay of $^{130}\text{Te}$ and place the most stringent limit to date on this decay half-life. The observed background, $(0.014 \pm 0.002) \text{counts/(keV kg yr)}$, is in line with our expectations [51]. The characteristic energy resolution at $Q_{\beta\beta}$ is $(7.7 \pm 0.5) \text{keV}$, which we foresee improving to $\sim 5 \text{keV}$ by optimizing operating conditions and through analysis improvements. A study of our future sensitivity for a number of scenarios is presented in Ref. [69]. The experimental progress in $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay searches has been dramatic in recent years; half-lives greater than $10^{25} \text{yr}$ are now probed by several experiments [70–75]. CUORE is the first ton-scale cryogenic detector array in operation, more than an order of magnitude larger than its predecessors. The successful commissioning and operation of this large-mass, low-background, cryogenic bolometer array represents a major advancement in the application of this technique to $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay searches.

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Note added in proof.—Recently, we became aware of two new complementary results using $^{76}$Ge [74,75].

Deceased.

Corresponding author.
cuore-spokesperson@.lngs.infn.it

Present address: University College Leuven-Limburg, 3590 Diepenbeek, Belgium.

Present address: Istituto Nazionale di Ottica, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (INO-CNR), Firenze I-50125, Italy.

Applied Physics Laboratory, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD 20723, USA.

Present address: INFN - Laboratori Nazionali del Gran Sasso, Assergi (L’Aquila) I-67100, Italy.

Present address: Research Square, Durham, NC 27701, USA.

Present address: Physics Division, P-23, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Los Alamos, NM 87544, USA.

Present address: Department of Physics, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA.

Present address: European Neutron Spallation Source (ESS), 225 92 Lund, Sweden.

Present address: ITER Organization, 13067 St. Paul-lez-Durance, France.

Present address: CSNSM, Univ. Paris-Sud, CNRS/IN2P3, Universit Paris-Saclay, 91405 Orsay, France.

Present address: INFN - Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati (Roma) I-00044, Italy.

Present address: Laboratoire Commun de Métrologie, LNE-CNAM, 93210 La Plaine Saint-Denis, France.

Present address: Max-Planck-Institut für Physik, 80805 München, Germany.

Present address: ABB Corporate Research Center, 722 26 Västerås, Sweden.

Present address: CryoVac GmbH & Co KG, 53842 Troisdorf, Germany.

Present address: Los Alamos National Laboratory, Los Alamos, NM 87545, USA.

[21] Cryomech PT415-RM.
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