Materials of cables and wires exposed to electromagnetic radiation

Types of radiation and their effects

Electromagnetic radiation is a familiar term in many different areas. It can occur naturally (e.g. solar or natural radioactivity) and can also be produced artificially (e.g. X-ray units, lights or mobile communications). It can be divided up into different types or components – the decisive factor here is the wavelength, or alternatively the frequency, of the radiation. The electromagnetic spectrum is divided up into the following categories, listed here in descending wavelength order, or ascending frequency order:

- alternating currents (e.g. very low frequency broadcasting)
- radio waves (e.g. radio broadcasting)
- microwaves (e.g. microwave ovens, mobile communications, radar)
- infrared radiation (thermal radiation, e.g. thermography, remote control)
- visible light (component of radiation from artificial sources of light and from the sun)
- ultraviolet radiation (UV radiation – component of sunlight, technical applications)
- X-radiation (e.g. image processing within medical technology or material testing)
- gamma radiation (e.g. nuclear energy, technical applications)

Due to the impact they have, gamma rays, x-rays and very short wavelength UV rays are also summarised under “ionising radiation”. This term refers to radiation that carries enough energy to free electrons from atoms or molecules (ionisation).

With organic compounds, such as plastics used for cables and wires, the fundamental factor to consider is the impact of UV radiation and ionising radiation. They have the highest amount of energy and therefore have the greatest impact on the materials out of all the types of electromagnetic radiation.
This influence is used in plastic processing to give materials certain properties – for example using the appropriate radiation conditions to set certain adhesives, coatings, insulation materials and sheath materials of cables and wires, which only in this way achieve the required strength and durability. This is known as “cross-linking” or, to be more precise, “electron beam cross-linking” because there are also other cross-linking processes (e.g. chemical).
When it comes to the practical use of cables and wires, however, UV radiation and ionising radiation tend to have undesired effects.Colours can fade and plastics can become dull or brittle. Ultimately if the plastic becomes brittle or cracks start to form, the cables will no longer be fit for use.

Use of cables and wires exposed to UV radiation

UV radiation is a component of solar radiation and therefore primarily affects exposed outdoor applications. Here the components which are able to penetrate the ozone layer have an impact: UVA radiation and a proportion of UVB radiation. UVC is filtered by the ozone layer and therefore does not reach the earth’s surface.
While UV radiation also occurs indoors, it is considerably less intense than it is outdoors because glass panes, depending on their design, can filter out a considerable proportion. Furthermore, shading is often installed and artificial sources of light usually only emit a small amount of UV radiation.

Since different products are subjected to remarkably different conditions at their respective sites of application, for example regarding the duration and angle of irradiation, as well as shading and other influencing factors such as ambient temperature, humidity and air quality, it is not possible to make any universal statements about the durability and service life of products (see also technical appendix T0, 7. Service life).

Testing methods complying with UV resistance-related standards (e.g. ISO 4892-2) enable a general evaluation of products that are to be exposed to UV radiation when in use and make it possible to compare different materials and end products.

The plastics used for cables and wires differ in their sensitivity to the impact of UV rays; using appropriate stabilisers, colour pigments or soot can considerably reduce this sensitivity by absorbing the UV radiation and converting it into less critical thermal radiation. This prevents UV rays from penetrating into the molecular chains of the sheath material, splitting them up into highly reactive radicals which attack the molecular chain structure of the plastic and in the process trigger accelerated ageing.

Cables and wires with black sheaths are generally better protected than those with other colours because black surfaces are considerably better at absorbing UV radiation.
This knowledge has also been applied in standards, thus cables with black sheaths are suitable for outdoor use in accordance with EN 50525-1 and VDE 0285-525-1.

Some plastics demonstrate a good level of resistance even without a black colouring, these are:

- cross-linked polyethylene (XLPE)
- elastomers (e.g. CR or Si)
- thermoplastic elastomers (TPE-E, TPE-O, TPE-U, e.g. PUR)
- fluoropolymers (e.g. PTFE or FEP)

However, these plastics also differ in terms of resistance depending on the colour because the aforementioned effect of black sheaths always improves resistance.

With polyurethane cables which are not black (e.g. orange or yellow cables), it is important to note that, despite fading considerably with time, they will continue displaying a good level of flexibility and strength because the base material is able to withstand the UV radiation, just not the colour pigments.
This means that despite the visible damage caused by UV radiation or weather conditions, these types can be technically still fully functional.

Use of cables and wires exposed to ionising radiation

Ionising radiation normally only occurs in defined applications and when it is supposed to, meaning that materials with the appropriate resistance can be specially adapted to the prevalent conditions of the application in advance.
Cables are therefore normally only tested for radiation resistance if their intended usage includes exposure to ionising radiation. This means that for all other cables, indications can only be made for the radiation resistance of typically used materials. While these indications are not representative of the resistance of the whole cable, the values can still act as a rough guide and make it possible to compare the cables with one another.

The radiation resistance of materials is defined using the Radiation Index (RI) in IEC 60544-4 and refers to the point at which the elongation at break is reduced to ≥50% of the original value.

Materials of cables and wires exposed to electromagnetic radiation

The table below lists the typical maximum dose of the individual materials in grays (and rad) of a gamma radiation source at which the elongation at break of the test specimen still remains above 50% of its unaged value.

Conversions:

1 Gy = 100 rad; 1Gy = 1J/kg

The resistance of cables, wires and other products for connection technology against ionising radiation plays a particularly crucial role in nuclear plants. In addition to the suitability of the products themselves, all the processes also need to meet the special requirements of such application areas.

This is why U.I. Lapp GmbH proved itself as qualified supplier of cables, wires, cable glands and cable-related accessories to nuclear plants by passing system-related and product-related quality assurance testing – see “Zertifikat KTA 1401” (Acknowledgement of quality assurance in accordance with regulation KTA 1401). The certificate is available in German at:
www.lappkabel.de/Service/Downloadcenter/Zertifikate

Resistance of plastics to ionising radiation

Material-type	Radiation resistance in Gy approx.	Radiation resistance in rad approx
PVC	8×10^5	8×10^7
PE LD	1×10^5	1×10^7
PE HD	7×10^4	7×10^6
VPE (XLPE)	1×10^5	1×10^7
PA	1×10^5	1×10^7
PP	1×10^3	1×10^5
PETP	1×10^7	1×10^7
PUR	5×10^5	5×10^7
TPE-E	1×10^5	1×10^7
TPE-O	1×10^5	1×10^7
NR	8×10^5	8×10^7
SIR	2×10^5	2×10^7
EPR	1×10^6	1×10^8
EVA	1×10^5	1×10^7
CR	2×10^5	2×10^7
ETFE	1×10^5	1×10^7
FEP	3×10^3	3×10^5
PFA	1×10^3	1×10^5
PTFE	1×10^3	1×10^5