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M. Jones
*Michigan State University*

T. Baumann
*Michigan State University*

J. Brett
*Hope College*

***See next page for additional authors***



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# Neutron-Unbound Excited States of 23N

**Abstract**
Neutron unbound states in 23N were populated via proton knockout from an 83.4 MeV/nucleon 24O beam on a liquid deuterium target. The two-body decay energy displays two peaks at E1~100keV and E2~1MeV with respect to the neutron separation energy. The data are consistent with shell model calculations predicting resonances at excitation energies of ~3.6MeV and ~4.5MeV. The selectivity of the reaction implies that these states correspond to the first and second 3/2− states. The energy of the first state is about 1.3 MeV lower than the first excited 2+ in 24O. This decrease is largely due to coupling with the πp−13/2 hole along with a small reduction of the N=16 shell gap in 23N.

**Keywords**
Neutron states, proton knockout, neutron separation energy, nuclear structure, nuclear decays, unstable nuclei, radioactive beams

**Disciplines**
Atomic, Molecular and Optical Physics | Nuclear | Quantum Physics

**Authors**
M. Jones, T. Baumann, J. Brett, J. Bullaro, P. A. DeYoung, J.E. Finck, N. Frank, K. Hammerton, J. Hinnefeld, Z. Kohley, A. N. Kuchera, J. Pereira, A. Rabeh, J. K. Smith, A. Spyrou, Sharon L. Stephenson, K. Stiefel, M. Tuttle-Timm, R. G.T. Zegers, and M. Thoennessen

# Neutron-unbound excited states of $^{23}$N

M. D. Jones,[1,2,*] T. Baumann,[1] J. Brett,[3] J. Bullaro,[4] P. A. DeYoung,[3] J. E. Finck,[5] N. Frank,[4] K. Hammerton,[1,6] J. Hinnefeld,[7] Z. Kohley,[1,6] A. N. Kuchera,[1] J. Pereira,[1] A. Rabeh,[4] J. K. Smith,[1,2,†] A. Spyrou,[1,2] S. L. Stephenson,[8] K. Stiefel,[1,6] M. Tuttle-Timm,[4] R. G. T. Zegers,[1,2,9] and M. Thoennessen[1,2]

[1]*National Superconducting Cyclotron Laboratory, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824, USA*
[2]*Department of Physics and Astronomy, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824, USA*
[3]*Department of Physics, Hope College, Holland, Michigan 49422-9000, USA*
[4]*Department of Physics and Astronomy, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois 61201, USA*
[5]*Department of Physics, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Michigan 48859, USA*
[6]*Department of Chemistry, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824, USA*
[7]*Deparment of Physics and Astronomy, Indiana University South Bend, South Bend, Indiana 46634-7111, USA*
[8]*Department of Physics, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania 17325, USA*
[9]*Joint Institute for Nuclear Astrophysics – Center for the Evolution of the Elements, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824, USA*

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Neutron unbound states in $^{23}$N were populated via proton knockout from an 83.4 MeV/nucleon $^{24}$O beam on a liquid deuterium target. The two-body decay energy displays two peaks at $E_1 \sim 100$ keV and $E_2 \sim 1$ MeV with respect to the neutron separation energy. The data are consistent with shell model calculations predicting resonances at excitation energies of ~3.6 MeV and ~4.5 MeV. The selectivity of the reaction implies that these states correspond to the first and second $3/2^-$ states. The energy of the first state is about 1.3 MeV lower than the first excited $2^+$ in $^{24}$O. This decrease is largely due to coupling with the $\pi p_{3/2}^{-1}$ hole along with a small reduction of the $N = 16$ shell gap in $^{23}$N.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Spectroscopy of nuclei with extreme $N/Z$ ratios can provide valuable insight into nuclear structure. Due to shifts in the single particle energies of exotic nuclei, classical shell closures can disappear while new shell gaps appear [1,2]. A well-known example of this is the "island of inversion," located around $A \sim 32$, where a quenching of the $N = 20$ shell gap results in nuclei with ground states occupying the $pf$ shell instead of the $sd$ shell [3]. In the oxygen isotopes, there is substantial evidence for the breakdown of the $N = 20$ shell gap, and the appearance of $N = 16$ as a magic number [4–7]. This shift has been attributed to the tensor component of the $NN$ interaction [8,9] as well as three-body forces [10].

As one moves down the $N = 16$ isotones, the removal of protons from the $\pi 0d_{5/2}$ orbital enables the $\nu 0d_{3/2}$ orbital to move higher in excitation resulting in a large energy difference between the $\nu 1s_{1/2}$ and $\nu 0d_{3/2}$ orbits in oxygen [2]. At present, there are no reports of bound- or unbound-excited states in the lighter isotones $^{23}$N and $^{22}$C. The measurement of these excited states can provide a better understanding of the changing shell structure in this region of the nuclear chart by extending our knowledge of the $N = 16$ gap into the proton $p$ shell. In this article, we present first experimental information on neutron-unbound excited states in $^{23}$N populated via proton-knockout from $^{24}$O.

*mdjones@lbl.gov; Present address: LBNL, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.

†Present address: Reed College, 3203 SE Woodstock Blvd, Portland, Oregon 97202, USA.

## II. EXPERIMENTAL METHOD

The experiment was carried out at the National Superconducting Cyclotron Laboratory (NSCL) where a 140 MeV/nucleon $^{48}$Ca beam impinged upon a $^{9}$Be target with a thickness of 1363 mg/cm$^2$ to produce an $^{24}$O beam at 83.4 MeV/nucleon. The A1900 fragment separator was used to select $^{24}$O from the other fragmentation products, and the remaining beam contaminants were removed by time-of-flight in the off-line analysis. The $^{24}$O beam proceeded to the experimental area where it impinged on the Ursinus College Liquid Hydrogen Target, filled with liquid deuterium ($LD_2$). Based on the design of Ryuto *et al.* [11], the $LD_2$ target is cylindrical with a diameter of 38 mm, a length of 30 mm, and is sealed with 125 $\mu$m-thick Kapton foils on each side.

A one-proton removal reaction from the $^{24}$O beam created $^{23}$N in an excited state above the neutron separation energy $S_n$, which promptly decayed to $^{22}$N. The resulting charged fragments were then swept 43.3° by a 4-Tm superconducting sweeper magnet [12] into a collection of position- and energy-sensitive charged-particle detectors.

Element identification was achieved via a $\Delta E$ vs. time-of-flight measurement, and isotope identification was obtained through correlations in the time-of-flight, dispersive position, and dispersive angle following the sweeper magnet. Additional information on this procedure can be found in Ref. [13]. The position and momentum of the charged fragments at the target were reconstructed using an inverse transformation matrix, obtained from the program COSY INFINITY [14,15].

The neutrons emitted in the decay of $^{23}$N traveled undisturbed by the magnetic field towards the Modular Neutron Array (MoNA) [16] and the Large-area multi-Institutional

 

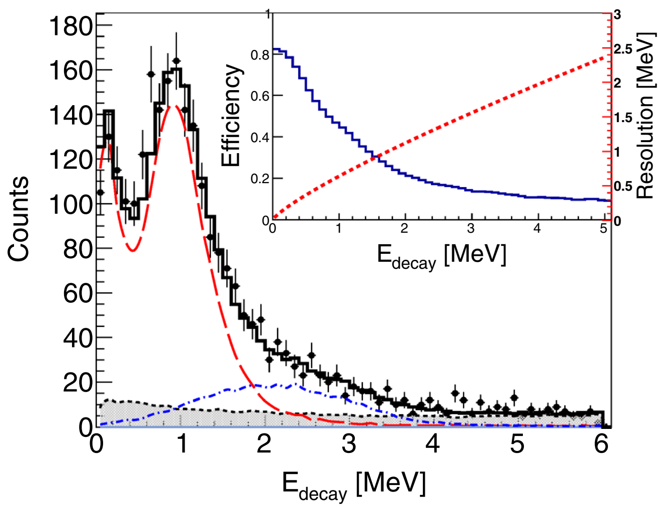


FIG. 1. Two-body decay energy for $^{22}N + 1n$. The best fit includes two-channel Breit-Wigners resulting from two states at 1.1 MeV (dashed-red line) and 2.4 MeV(dot-dashed-blue line). Background contributions are in shaded gray. The efficiency and resolution are shown in the inset as the blue histogram (left scale) and red-dashed line (right scale), respectively.

Scintillator Array (LISA). MoNA and LISA each consist of 144 bars of plastic scintillator with photomultiplier tubes on both ends and provide a measurement of neutron time-of-flight and position. Additional details on the experimental setup can be found in Refs. [17,18]. MoNA, LISA, and the sweeper provide a full kinematic measurement of the neutrons and charged particles emitted in the decay of $^{23}N$.

## III. ANALYSIS

The two-body decay energy is defined as

$$E_{\text{decay}} = M^* - M_{^{22}\text{N}} - m_n,$$

where $M^*$ is the invariant mass of the decaying system, $M_{^{22}\text{N}}$ the mass of $^{22}N$, and $m_n$ the neutron mass. The decay energy, $E_{\text{decay}}$, corresponds to the excitation energy in $^{23}N$ above the neutron emission threshold. The invariant mass of the two-body system is obtained from the experimentally measured four-momenta of $^{22}N$ and the first time-ordered interaction in MoNA-LISA. To remove interactions from background $\gamma$ rays, a time-of-flight gate on prompt neutrons in coincidence with $^{22}N$ fragments was applied. The observed two-body decay energy for $^{23}N$ is shown in Fig. 1, and displays two prominent peaks at $E_1 \sim 100$ keV and $E_2 \sim 1$ MeV. The efficiency and resolution of MoNA-LISA for the present setup are shown as a function of the decay energy in the inset.

A Monte Carlo simulation was used to model the decay of $^{23}N$. The simulation includes the beam characteristics, the reaction mechanism, and subsequent decay. The efficiency, resolution, and acceptance of the charged particle detectors, along with the response of MoNA-LISA, are fully incorporated into the simulation. Therefore the results of the simulation are directly comparable to the experimental spectra. The neutron interactions in MoNA-LISA were modeled with GEANT4 [19] and MENATE_R [20]. A modification was made to the $^{12}C(n,np)^{11}B$ inelastic cross section within MENATE_R to better agree with previous measurement [21] at $T_n = 90$ MeV. No qualitative change was observed in the shape of the simulated one-neutron decay energy spectrum when the inelastic cross sections for neutrons on carbon were increased or decreased by an order of magnitude in MENATE_R.

The input decay energy line shape was an energy dependent Breit-Wigner of the form

$$\sigma_l(E) \sim \frac{\Gamma_l}{(E_0 - E)^2 + \frac{1}{4}\left(\Gamma_l^2\right)},$$

where $E_0$ is the position of the peak and $\Gamma_l$ the energy-dependent width. Given that $^{22}N$ has two bound excited states [22], it is possible for the neutron decay to branch to multiple final states. To model this, the two-channel form of the Breit-Wigner was used with a common normalization:

$$\sigma_{\text{tot}}(E) \sim \sigma_1(E; E_1) + \sigma_2(E; E_2),$$

where $E_i$ is the energy of each branch, and the width in the numerator $\Gamma_l$ becomes the partial-width $\Gamma_i$. The total widths $\Gamma_i^T$ replace the width in the denominator and are given by the expressions

$$\Gamma_1^T = \Gamma_1(E) + \Gamma_2(E - E_{12}),$$
$$\Gamma_2^T = \Gamma_1(E + E_{12}) + \Gamma_2(E),$$

where $E_{12} = E_1 - E_2$ is the energy difference between the channels, with $E_1$ denoting the higher-energy channel. For simplicity, the shift functions have been neglected.

While it is possible for higher-lying states to be present at $E_{\text{decay}} > 3$ MeV, they are not resolved in the data and treated as background. Nonresonant contributions were modeled with a Gaussian decay distribution with a central energy of $E_{\text{decay}} = 10$ MeV and a width of $\sigma = 5$ MeV. This choice of line-shape reproduces the relative velocity between the fragment and neutron well and has been used to describe nonresonant contributions in the decay of $^{24}O$, populated by knockout from $^{26}F$ [4].

The measured decay energy can be related to the excitation energy of $^{23}N$ by $E^* = E_{\text{decay}} + S_n$, where $S_n$ was calculated using the mass excesses from Gaudefroy *et al.* [23]. Their values of $\Delta M_{23N} = 36.72(0.28)$ MeV and $\Delta M_{22N} = 31.11(0.26)$ MeV result in a one neutron separation energy of $S_n = 2.46(0.38)$ MeV. This separation energy is about 700 keV higher than what is obtained using the masses in the 2012 AME [24]. The two-neutron separation energy is $S_{2n} = 4.67(0.30)$ MeV.

Using the mass excesses measured by Gaudefroy *et al.* [23], theoretical predictions for the excited states of $^{23}N$ are shown in Fig. 2 with various interactions based on Ref. [25] including the WBP, WBT, WBTM, and WBM Hamiltonians in addition to the continuum shell model (CSM) [26]. The WBTM and WBM interactions contain a 12.5% and 25% reduction of the neutron-neutron interaction strength in the *sd* space. In the lighter nitrogen isotopes, a 12.5% reduction was necessary to reproduce the low-lying levels [22,27], while a 25% reduction was needed for the heavier carbon nuclei [22]. Proton excitations were limited to the $p$ shell, while neutron

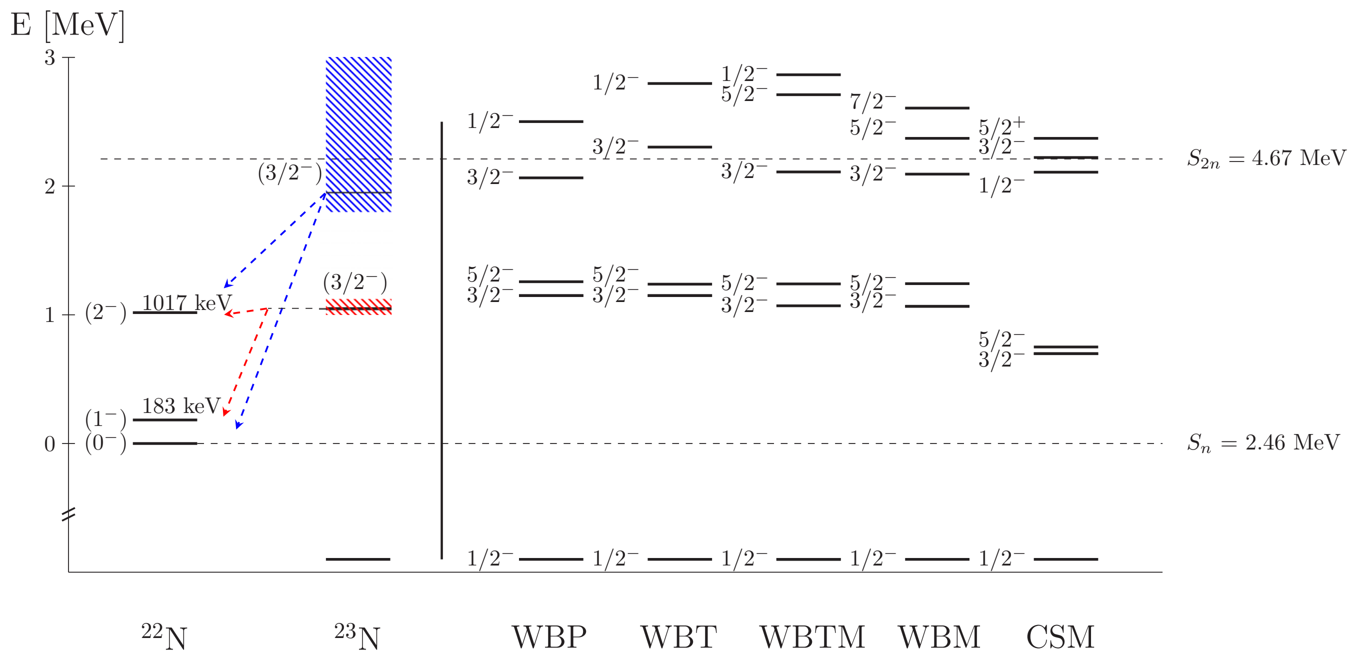


FIG. 2. A possible level ordering in $^{23}$N consistent with the observed spectrum. The arrows indicate transitions from the first- and second-excited $3/2^-$ state in $^{23}$N to various states in $^{22}$N. The hatched areas indicate the experimental uncertainty given the assumptions discussed in the text. The colors correspond to the fit in Fig. 1. The branching from the $3/2^-$ states to the various excited states of $^{22}$N cannot be resolved without $\gamma$ detection. Shell model calculations for $^{23}$N are shown for comparison on the right.

excitations were restricted to the *sd* shell. These calculations predict several excited states with spin-parity $1/2^-$, $3/2^-$, and $5/2^-$ in the vicinity of 3–5 MeV. Due to the selective nature of the proton removal reaction, it is not likely to populate a $5/2^-$ state in $^{23}$N from $^{24}$O. A $5/2^-$ state in $^{23}$N can be made by coupling of the $p_{1/2}$ proton hole to the $2^+$ state of the $^{24}$O core, or by coupling of a $p_{3/2}$ proton hole to the $2^+$ or $1^+$ state in the $^{24}$O core. The ground state of $^{24}$O has very little to no overlap with these configurations in $^{23}$N.

The spectroscopic overlaps $C^2S$ between $^{23}$N and $^{24}$O were calculated using the WBP and WBT Hamiltonians in NUSHELLX [28] and are summarized in Table I. The largest overlap is with the ground state of $^{23}$N, which is bound and was not within the acceptance of the sweeper magnet in this experiment. The next strongest overlaps are for the $3/2^-$ states where the single-particle strength is fragmented. Given that the overlap for the first $1/2^-$ excited state is very small, the most likely candidate for the spin-parity of the observed state(s) is $3/2^-$.

It is important to note that $^{22}$N has two bound excited states, one at 183 keV, and another at 1017 keV [22]. Although the spin-parities of these states are unknown, the tentative assignments of the ground, first, and second excited states are $0^-$, $1^-$, and $2^-$, respectively. Thus, the observed peaks in the two-body decay energy could correspond to transitions to the $2^-$ excited state of $^{22}$N instead of the ground state or the first excited $1^-$ state. Although there are neutron-unbound states in $^{22}$N that $^{23}$N could decay to, the selection of $^{22}$N in the sweeper eliminates any contributions from these branches in the two-body spectrum of $^{23}$N.

As it is not possible to discern between any number of degeneracies or level orderings that could produce the observed spectrum without measuring the emitted $\gamma$ rays, one has to rely on theoretical calculations. For this reason, the data are interpreted and fit within the context of the shell-model predictions.

Of the interactions considered here, none predict a state near threshold (see Fig. 2). The lowest $3/2^-$ state is predicted to be at approximately 1 MeV above $S_n$, with the second $3/2^-$ being about an MeV higher. The 100 keV peak then does not correspond to a decay to the ground state but rather a transition to the $2^-$ state in $^{22}$N, while the $E_2 \sim 1$ MeV peak is comprised of transitions to both the first-excited and ground state of $^{22}$N. While there are three possible final states, the splitting between the ground and first-excited state cannot be resolved due to the experimental resolution for decay energies above 1 MeV. For

TABLE I. Spectroscopic overlaps between various $J^\pi$ in $^{23}$N and the ground state of $^{24}$O, calculated using the WBP and WBT interactions [25].

| | WBP | | WBT | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| $J^\pi$ | $E_{\rm calc}$ (MeV) | $\langle ^{23}N\|^{24}O\rangle$ $C^2S$ | $E_{\rm calc}$ (MeV) | $\langle ^{23}N\|^{24}O\rangle$ $C^2S$ |
| $1/2^-_1$ | 0 | 1.9328 | 0 | 1.9529 |
| $1/2^-_2$ | 4.961 | 0.0025 | 5.257 | 0 |
| $\sum C^2S$ | | 1.9578 | | 1.9529 |
| $3/2^-_1$ | 3.610 | 1.4645 | 3.610 | 0.6893 |
| $3/2^-_2$ | 4.525 | 0.6480 | 4.764 | 1.0483 |
| $3/2^-_3$ | 5.215 | 0.1682 | 5.471 | 0.0944 |
| $3/2^-_4$ | 6.989 | 1.4324 | 6.693 | 1.8889 |
| $\sum C^2S$ | | 3.7130 | | 3.7209 |

this reason, the $0^-$ and $1^-$ states are treated as a single state at their average energy. Since the spacing between the two $3/2^-$ states is expected to be about an MeV, another state was assumed to be around ∼2 MeV. In addition, because the final states in $^{22}$N are only tentatively known, the $\ell$ values are chosen to be consistent with the interpretation.

The assumption of a second excited state is qualitatively supported by the data, as the high-energy tail cannot be described without excessive widths. In order to fit the spectrum with a single two-channel Breit-Wigner, it is necessary for the 1 MeV peak to have $\ell = 2$ and a width of $\Gamma \sim 1.5$ MeV. In this scenario, it is also necessary for the 100 keV branch to be $\ell = 0$ as the relative intensity of the peaks is driven by the partial widths. The cross section for $\ell = 2$ drops rapidly as $E_{\rm decay}$ approaches zero and the 100 keV peak cannot be $\ell = 2$ in the presence of another broad channel unless it has an even larger width.

The spectrum can also not be described with both channels being $\ell = 0$, because the widths are coupled and the penetrability for $\ell = 0$ is constant. Thus, if the 1 MeV channel is made excessively broad so too is the 100 keV branch and the fit fails to describe the data.

The single-particle decay width for the decay to the ground state is 200 keV for $\ell = 2$. Examining the spectroscopic factors in Table I, we note that the $3/2^-$ single-particle strength is fragmented indicating that these states are mixed in their neutron configurations. Thus one would expect widths less than the single-particle width, and so the solution with a single state is neglected due to the large necessary width. The data are fit with two-channel Breit-Wigners resulting from two $3/2^-$ states separated by approximately 1 MeV.

Since the branching ratios are not constrained without the knowledge of the $\gamma$-ray decays in $^{22}$N, there are too many free parameters to uniquely describe the data. Therefore a set of narrow widths was chosen to reduce the parameter space. These widths are $\Gamma_i = 150$ keV for the low-energy branches of the two states ($\ell = 0$) and 400 keV ($\ell = 0$) and 300 keV ($\ell = 2$) for the high-energy branch of the first and second $3/2^-$ states, respectively.

The energies of the two $3/2^-$ are then minimized simultaneously after fixing the partial widths. In addition, the energy of each branch is required to be consistent during the minimization. The best-fit energies for the two $3/2^-$ states are $E_{\rm decay} = 1070 \pm 100$ keV, and $E_{\rm decay} = 2500^{+500}_{-700}$ keV. The errors in the fit parameters are approximate due to the fixed partial widths. They are purely statistical and are determined by the $1\sigma$ limit in the $\chi^2$ minimization. Accounting for the separation energy places the first excited $3/2^-$ at $E_x = 3530 \pm 100$ (stat) $\pm 400$ (sys) keV.

At present the uncertainties are too large to uniquely determine the contributions from the possible branchings two $3/2^-$ states would produce. In order to completely disentangle the spectrum, one would need to measure the emitted $\gamma$ rays in a triple-coincidence measurement ($n + \gamma + {}^{22}$N).

## IV. DISCUSSION

The present measurement alone is not sufficient to fully determine the size of the $N = 16$ shell gap in $^{23}$N. In $^{24}$O the $N = 16$ shell gap was calculated by taking the $(2J + 1)$ weighted average of the $1^+$ and $2^+$ excited states, as they are composed of $1p{-}1h$ excitations above the $^{24}$O ground state [4]. Similarly, the same can be done in $^{23}$N, but one needs to take into account four states as the $2^+$ and $1^+$ configuration of neutrons, $(\nu 1s_{1/2})^1 \otimes (\nu 0d_{3/2})^1$, can couple with the unpaired $\pi 0p_{1/2}$ proton to give $(5/2^-, 3/2^-)$ and $(3/2^-, 1/2^-)$, respectively. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the $1p$-$1h$ neutron configuration in $^{23}$N will mix with the $\pi 0p_{3/2}$ hole, lowering its energy.

In the WBP, WBT, WBTM, and WBM interactions, the lowest $3/2^-$ state in $^{23}$N is indeed a mixture, with the occupation numbers giving a significant proton hole in the $\pi p_{1/2}$ and $\pi p_{3/2}$ orbitals, and a $(\nu 1s_{1/2})^1 \otimes (\nu 0d_{3/2})^1$ configuration of neutrons. One may write the wave function for the $3/2^-$ state as

$$|^{23}\mathrm{N}\rangle_{3/2-} = \alpha p_{3/2}^{-1} \otimes |^{24}\mathrm{O}\rangle_{\rm g.s.} + \beta p_{1/2}^{-1} \otimes |^{24}\mathrm{O}\rangle_{2+} + \gamma p_{1/2}^{-1} \otimes |^{24}\mathrm{O}\rangle_{1+},$$

where $\alpha$, $\beta$, and $\gamma$ are coefficients constrained by the normalization $\alpha^2 + \beta^2 + \gamma^2 = 1$. According to the WBP calculation, the pure $\pi p_{3/2}^{-1}$ configuration comprises of roughly 37% of the total wave function ($\alpha \sim 1/\sqrt{3}$), with the remaining amplitude shared equally between the $2^+$ and $1^+$ configurations.

Thus the energy of the lowest $3/2^-$ state depends on both the $N = 16$ shell gap and the energy of the $\pi 0p_{3/2}^{-1}$ hole, which is dictated by the spin-orbit splitting. The splitting between the $d_{3/2}$-$s_{1/2}$ and $p_{1/2}$-$p_{3/2}$ orbitals can be altered within NUSHELLX to study this dependence.

Let $\Delta$ denote the change in energy for either the $d_{3/2}$ or $p_{1/2}$ orbital for both protons and neutrons from their initial values in the WBP calculation, using the same model-space restrictions as before. Figure 3 shows the energy of the lowest $3/2^-$ state as

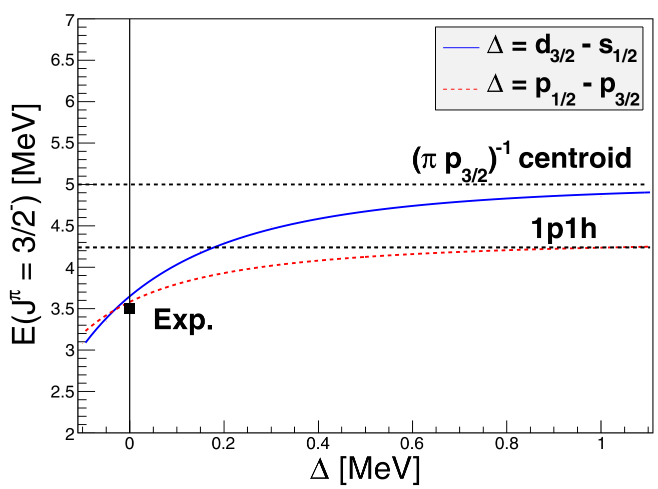


FIG. 3. Energy dependence of the first-excited $3/2^-$ state on the shift, $\Delta$, on the energy of the $d_{3/2}$ orbital (solid-blue line) or $p_{1/2}$ orbit (dashed-red line). The dotted black lines denote the energies of the pure $1p$-$1h$ or $\pi p_{3/2}^{-1}$ configurations in the initial calculation ($\Delta = 0$). The experimental energy determined in this work is denoted by the black square.

a function of either the $N = 16$ shell gap (solid-blue line) or the spin-orbit splitting (dotted-red line). By increasing the energy of the $d_{3/2}$ or $p_{1/2}$ orbitals independently, the mixing between the configurations is reduced until they are separated at the asymptotes. In the case of the $d_{3/2}$ orbit, increasing the $N = 16$ shell gap causes the $1p$-$1h$ configuration to be prohibitively costly in energy thus the $3/2^-$ state is comprised entirely of the $\pi p_{3/2}^{-1}$ hole. Likewise, increasing the spin-orbit splitting causes the promotion of a particle from the $\pi p_{3/2}$ to the $\pi p_{1/2}$ to be too energetic, and the lower energy configuration is instead the $1p$-$1h$ configuration across the $N = 16$ shell gap.

Evidence for the size of the $N = 16$ shell gap in $^{24}$O can be deduced from the energy of the first excited $2^+$ state as shown in Figure 4 of Ref. [4]. In order to calculate the equivalent energy in $^{23}$N one has to take the $(2J + 1)$ weighted average of the first $3/2^-$ and $5/2^-$ states. All Hamiltonians considered in Fig. 2 predict these two states to be nearly degenerate, thus the excitation energy of the $3/2^-$ measured in the present experiment can be used to estimate the equivalent $2^+$ energy.

The most recent ENSDF evaluation lists the excitation energy of the first $2^+$ in $^{24}$O as 4.79(11) MeV [29], corresponding to the weighted average of 4.82(11) [4] and 4.75(14) [5]. A more recent measurement of 4.70(15) MeV [30] agrees with this evaluation.

The present value of the excitation energy of about 3.5 MeV for the $3/2^-$ state in $^{23}$N is 1.3 MeV lower than the $2^+$ state in $^{24}$O. In the limit of no mixing from the $p_{3/2}^{-1}$ hole configuration, $[\Delta(p_{1/2}) \sim 1]$, the energy of the lowest $3/2^-$ increases from 3.61 MeV to 4.24 MeV which is 500 keV lower than the excitation of the $2^+$ in $^{24}$O. The $N = 16$ shell gap, or the $(2J + 1)$ average of the four lowest states in the $1p$-$1h$ multiplet, is around 4.53 MeV when the contributions from the $p_{3/2}^{-1}$ configuration are removed. This value is 300–400 keV lower than in $^{24}$O where this average was found to be 4.95(16) MeV [4], thus the shell gap in $^{23}$N is comparable to $^{24}$O. The shift in the effective $2^+$ energy is largely due to the coupling to the $p_{3/2}$ hole. In order to confirm this experimentally the excitation energy of the $5/2^-$ state in $^{23}$N should be measured.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Neutron unbound excited states in $^{23}$N were populated via proton knockout from an $^{24}$O beam on a deuterium target. The two-body decay energy of $^{23}$N displays two prominent peaks at $E_1 \sim 100$ keV and $E_2 \sim 1$ MeV. Because the daughter nuclide $^{22}$N has two bound excited states, it is not possible to distinguish between degeneracies or multiple level schemes that may produce the observed energy differences in the two-body spectrum of $^{23}$N. A triple coincidence experiment detecting the $^{22}$N fragments, neutrons and $\gamma$ rays is necessary to measure the branchings to the different final states.

The data are consistent with several shell model interactions which predict a $3/2^-$ state at ∼1 MeV and ∼2 MeV above $S_n$ in $^{23}$N. Similar to the first excited $2^+$ state in $^{24}$O, the first of these two $3/2^-$ states can be used to estimate the $N = 16$ shell gap. Its excitation energy of about 3.5 MeV is significantly lower than the $^{24}$O $2^+$ state at 4.8 MeV, however this reduction is largely due to configuration mixing with the $\pi p_{3/2}^{-1}$ hole, thus indicating only a slight a reduction of the $N = 16$ gap in nitrogen.

Finally, in order to compare these data directly it is necessary to measure the first excited $5/2^-$ state in $^{23}$N. A future experiment designed to populate this state, for example inelastic excitation of $^{23}$N, would be valuable. In addition, the distribution of single-particle strength for the $3/2^-$ will be vital to determining the $\pi p_{3/2}^{-1}$ centroid experimentally and further understanding the mixing between the $1p1h$ and $\pi p_{3/2}^{-1}$ configurations.

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