THE NUMBER OF LIGHT NEUTRINO TYPES FROM COLLIDER EXPERIMENTS

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The most precise measurements of the number of light neutrino types, N_ν, come from studies of Z production in e^+e^- collisions. At the time of this report, the most recent (preliminary) combined analysis of the four LEP experiments [1] included over 16 million visible Z decays. The invisible partial width, $\Gamma_{\rm inv}$, is determined from these data by subtracting the measured visible partial widths, corresponding to Z decays into quarks and charged leptons, from the total Z width. The invisible width is assumed to be due to N_ν light neutrino species each contributing the neutrino partial width Γ_ν as given by the Standard Model. In order to reduce the model dependence, the Standard Model value for the ratio of the neutrino to charged leptonic partial widths, $(\Gamma_\nu/\Gamma_\ell)_{\rm SM} = 1.991 \pm 0.001$, is used instead of $(\Gamma_\nu)_{\rm SM}$ to determine the number of light neutrino types:

$$N_\nu = \frac{\Gamma_{\rm inv}}{\Gamma_\ell}\left(\frac{\Gamma_\ell}{\Gamma_\nu}\right)_{\rm SM}$$

The combined LEP result is $N_\nu = 2.993 \pm 0.011$.

In the past, when only small samples of Z decays had been recorded by the LEP experiments and by the Mark II at SLC, the uncertainty in N_ν was reduced by using Standard Model fits to the measured hadronic cross sections at several center-of-mass energies near the Z resonance. Since this method is much more dependent on the Standard Model, the approach described above is favored.

Before the advent of the SLC and LEP, limits on the number of neutrino generations were placed by experiments at lower-energy e^+e^- colliders by measuring the cross section of the process $e^+e^- \to \nu\overline{\nu}\gamma$. The ASP, CELLO, MAC, MARK J, and VENUS experiments observed a total of 3.9 events above background [2], leading to a 95% CL limit of $N_\nu < 4.8$. This process has a much larger cross section at center-of-mass energies near the Z mass and has been measured at LEP by the ALEPH, DELPHI, L3, and OPAL experiments [3]. These experiments have observed several thousand such events, and the combined result is $N_\nu = 3.00 \pm 0.09$.

Experiments at $p\overline{p}$ colliders also placed limits on N_ν by determining the total Z width from the observed ratio of $W^\pm \to \ell^\pm \nu$ to $Z \to \ell^+\ell^-$ events [4]. This involved a calculation that assumed Standard Model values for the total W width and the ratio of W and Z leptonic partial widths, and used an estimate of the ratio of Z to W production cross sections. Now that the Z width is very precisely known from the LEP experiments, the approach is now one of those used to determine the W width.

References

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