

Search for Light Dark Matter with Ionization Signals in XENONnT

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Table of Content



01

The Dark Matter Problem

02

XENONnT Experiment

03

Studies on Ionization (S2) Pulse
Shape

04

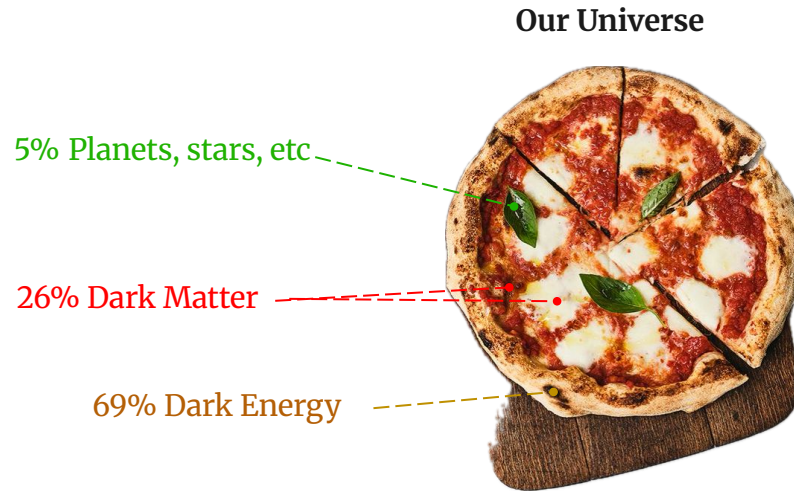
Search for Light Dark Matter using
S2-only Data

05

Summary and Outlook

01. The Dark Matter Problem

DM evidence, properties, detections, mass regime



What we can actually see (detect)



What is the nature of dark matter?

Dark Matter Evidence

Galactic Scale

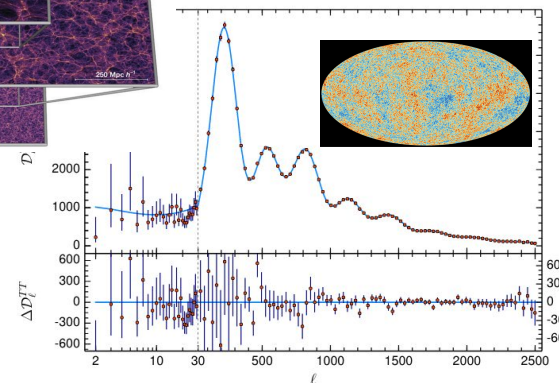
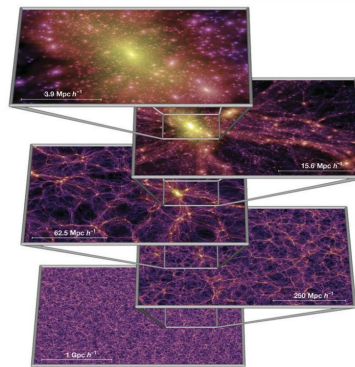
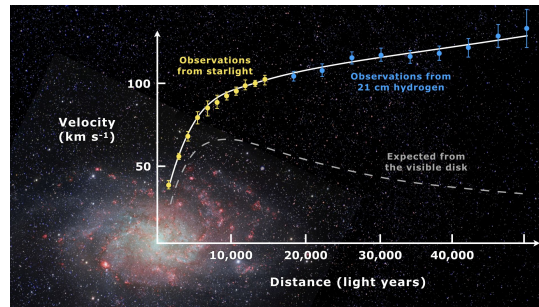
Galaxy rotation curves

Galaxy Cluster Scale

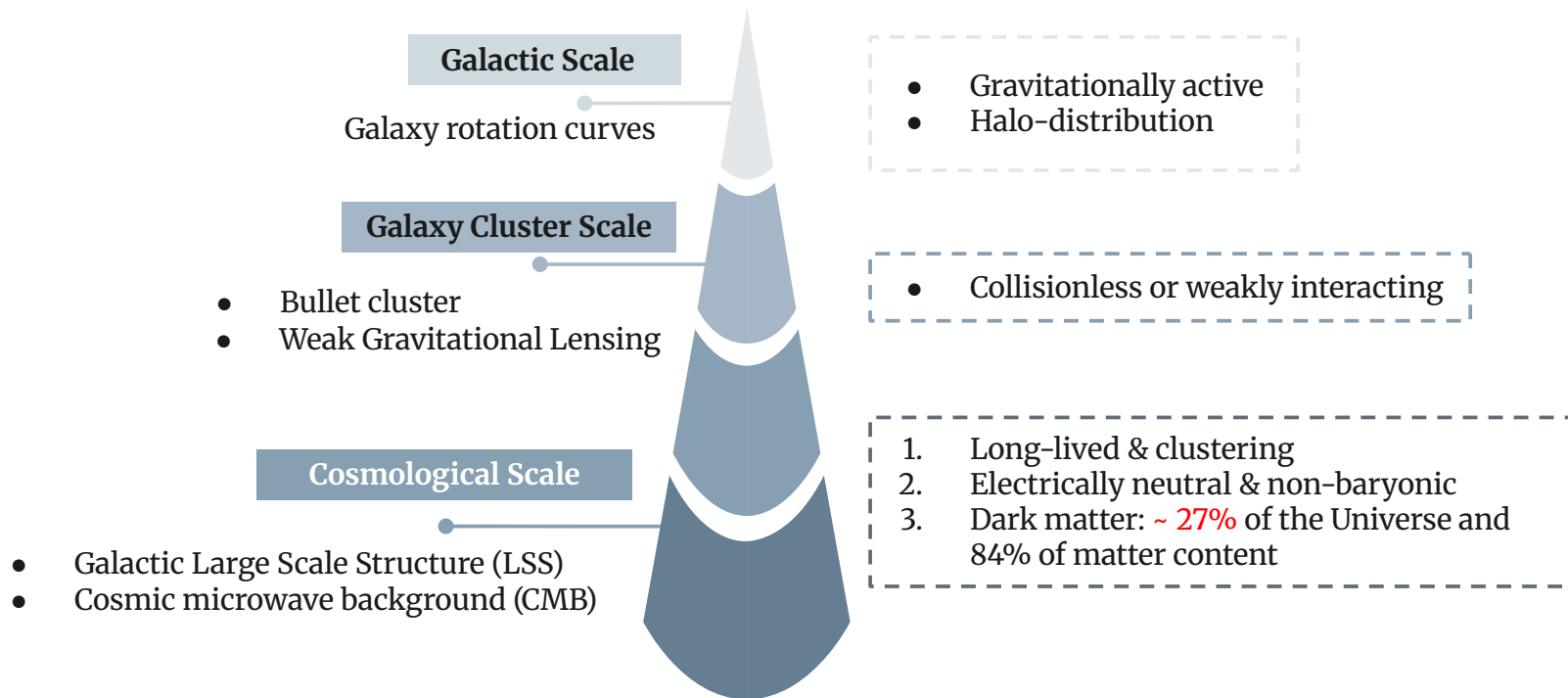
- Bullet cluster
- Weak Gravitational Lensing

Cosmological Scale

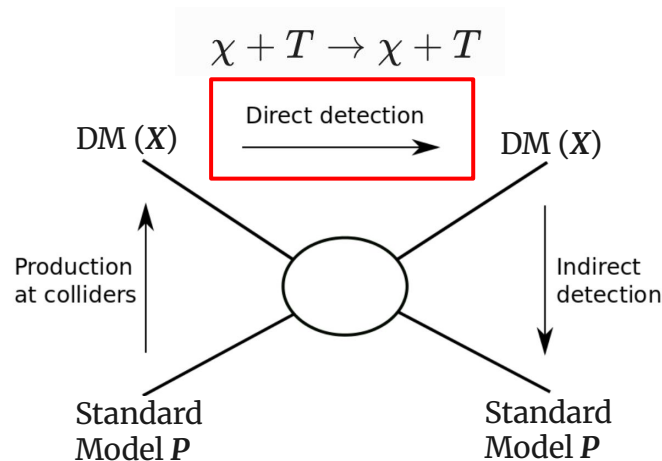
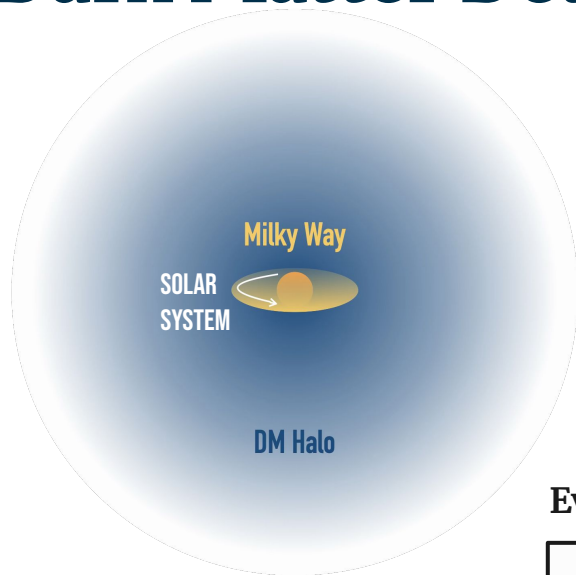
- Galactic Large Scale Structure (LSS)
- Cosmic microwave background (CMB)



Dark Matter Properties



Dark Matter Detection



Event rate:

$$\frac{dR}{dE_R} \propto \frac{\rho_0}{m_\chi} \int_{v_{min}} \frac{d\sigma}{dE_R} v \cdot \mathbf{f}(\mathbf{v}) d^3\mathbf{v}$$

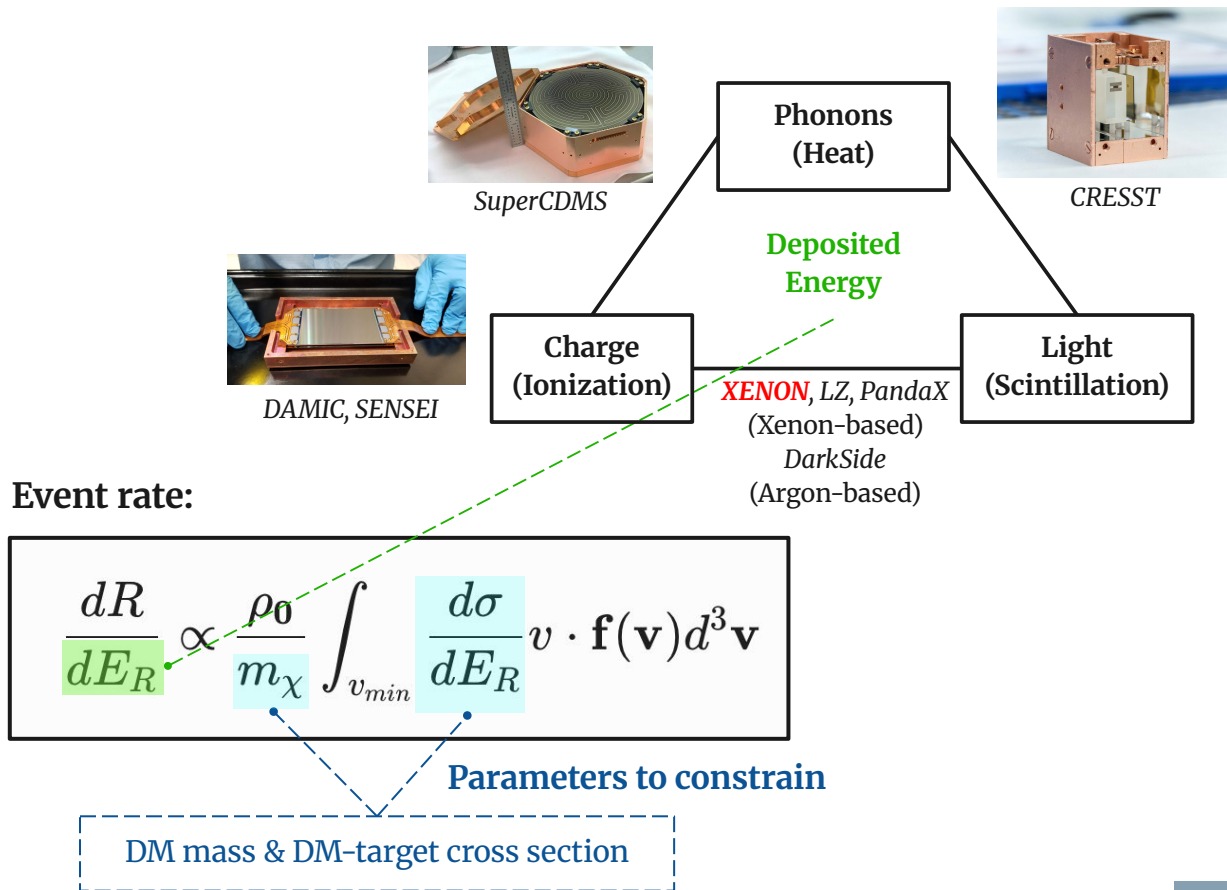
Astrophysics inputs

Local mass density:
~0.3 GeV/cm³
In an Earth-sized volume:
~0.5 kg

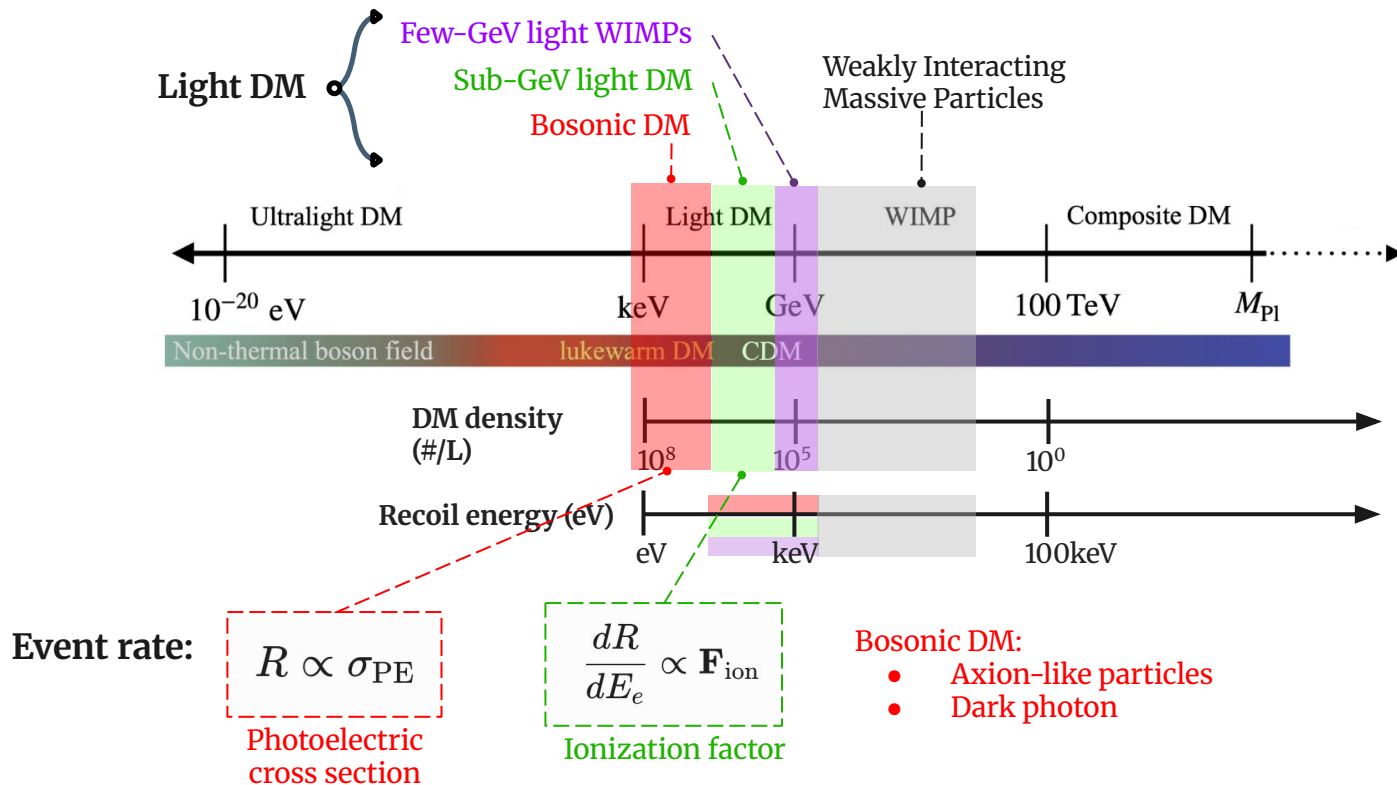
Velocity distribution:
• Standard Halo Model



Dark Matter Detection

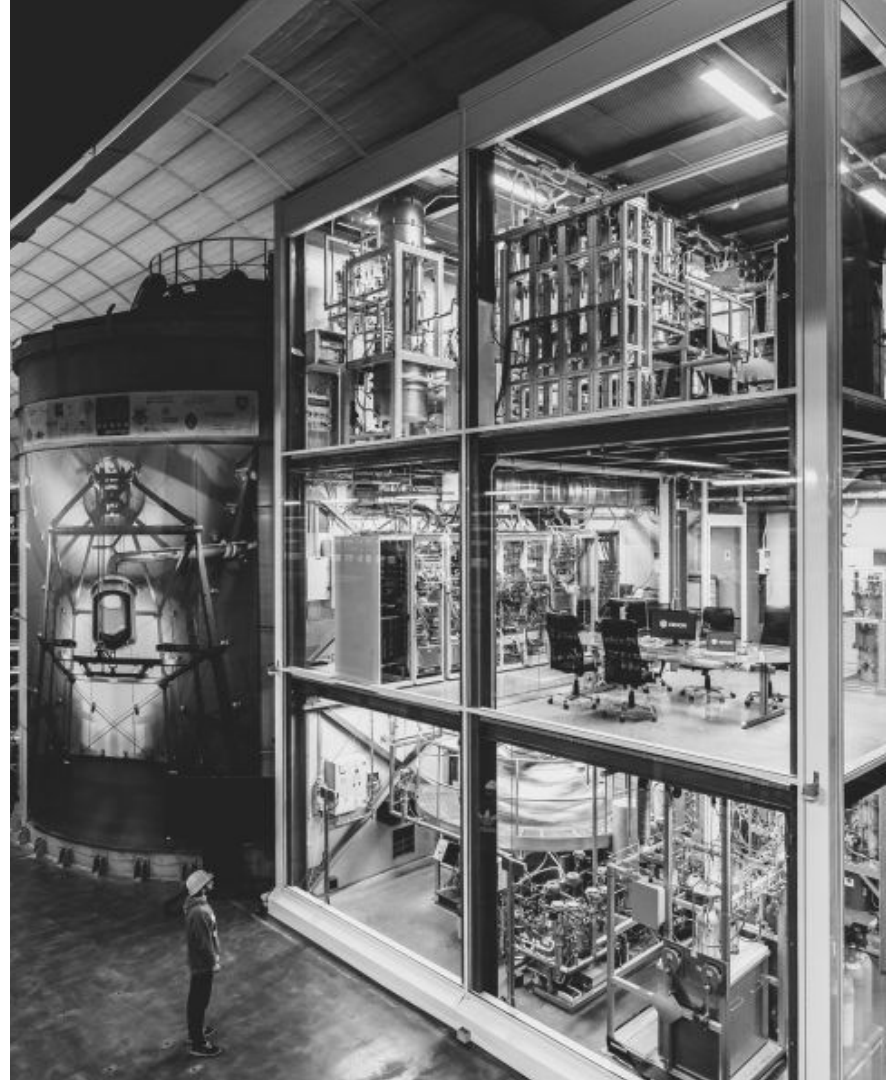


Dark Matter Mass Regime



02. XENONnT Experiments

- Detector working principle
- Science data overview



The XENON Program

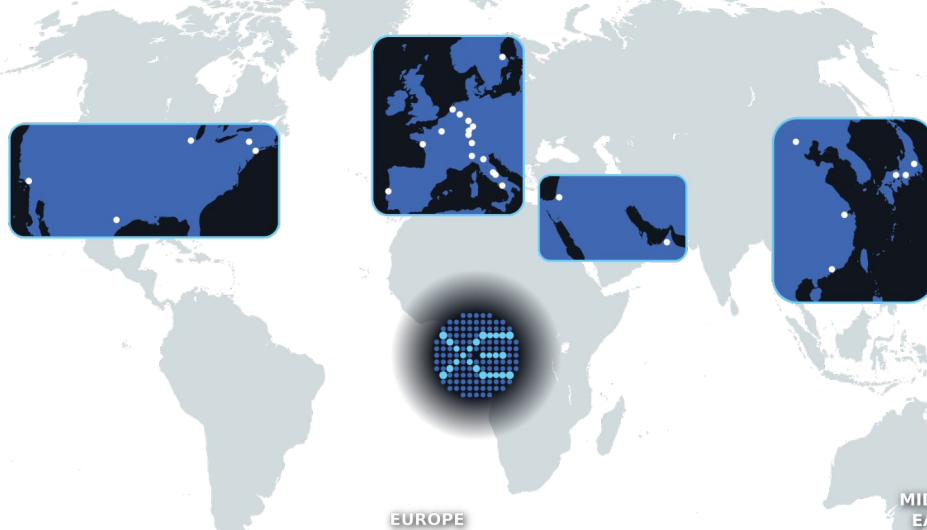


XENON

~ 200
Scientists

30
Institutions

12
Countries



AMERICA

- UC San Diego
- San Diego
- Houston
- THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
- Chicago
- COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
- New York City
- Bucknell UNIVERSITY
- Lewisburg

EUROPE

- Zurich
- KIT
- Karlsruhe Institute of Technology
- Münster
- Freiburg
- Mainz
- Heidelberg
- Heidelberg
- Amsterdam
- Stockholm University
- Coimbra
- Subatech
- LPNHE
- PARIS
- INFN
- Torino
- Bologna
- L'Aquila
- Assergi
- Napoli

MIDDLE EAST

- Beijing
- Hangzhou
- Shenzhen
- 東京大学
- Tokyo
- NAGOYA UNIVERSITY
- Nagoya
- Kobe
- Science Tokyo
- Abu Dhabi
- Tokyo

Timeline

XENON10
2005
14 kg



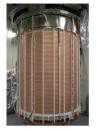
XENON100
2008
62 kg



XENON1T
2016
2 t



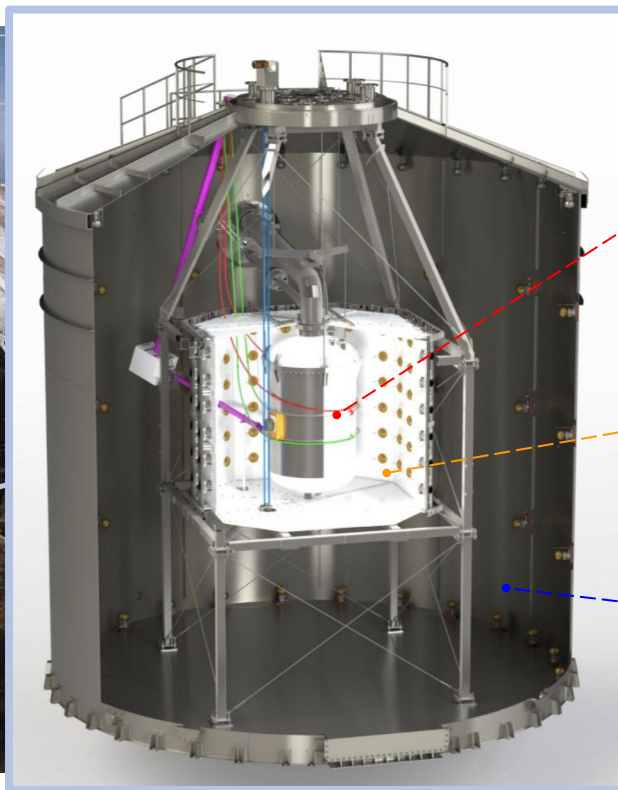
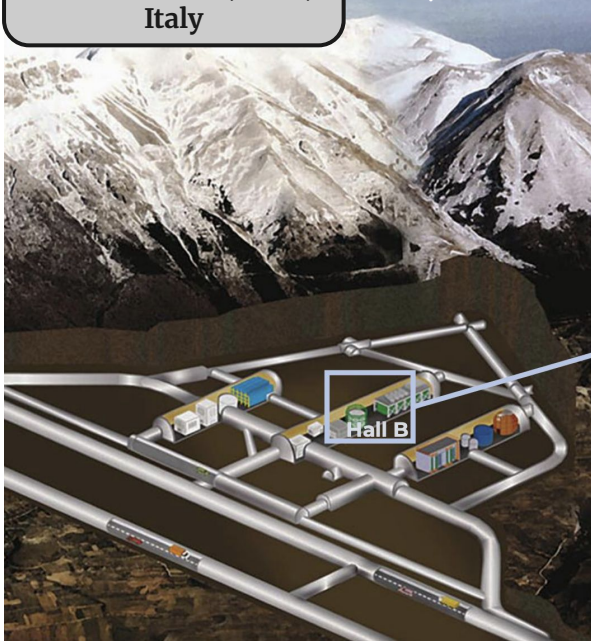
XENONnT
2020
6 t



XENONnT Experiment

INFN Laboratori
Nazionali
del Gran Sasso (LNGS)
Italy

3600 m.w.e
shielding
Depth: 1400m



Time Projection Chamber

- 5.9 t active target
- 8.6 t total mass
- 1.5 m drift length
- 1.3 m diameter
- 494 3" PMTs

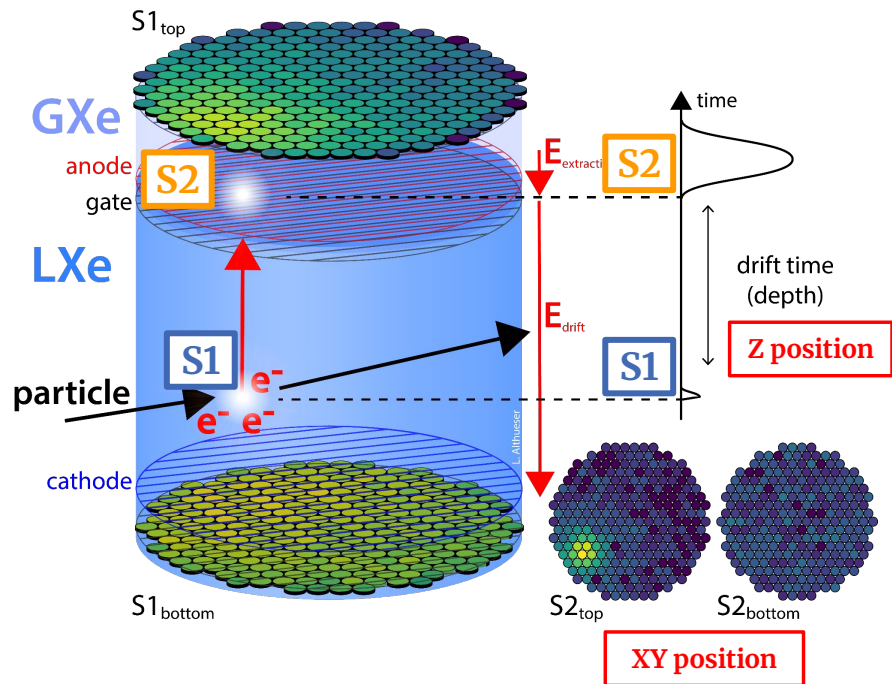
Neutron Veto

- Active Gd-water Cherenkov veto (120 8" PMTs)

Muon Veto

- Active Gd-water Cherenkov veto (84 8" PMTs)

XENONnT Experiment



Dual phase Xe TPC (Time projection chamber)

- **S1:** Prompt scintillation light
- **S2:** Secondary scintillation light by ionized electrons
- **3D Position reconstruction:** Drift time + PMT pattern
- **Energy reconstruction:**

$$E = W \left(\frac{cS_1}{g_1} + \frac{cS_2}{g_2} \right)$$

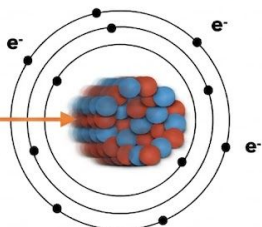
W: Average energy to produce a quanta

cS1, cS2: Corrected area of S1 and S2

g1, g2: Gain of **S1 (~0.1)** and **S2 (~15)**

Event discrimination | Calibrations

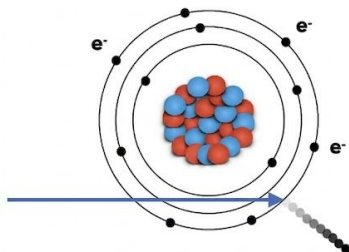
Nuclear Recoil (NR)



Credits: @Maxime Pierre

- WIMPs
- Neutrons
- Neutrino (CEvNS)

Electronic Recoil (ER)

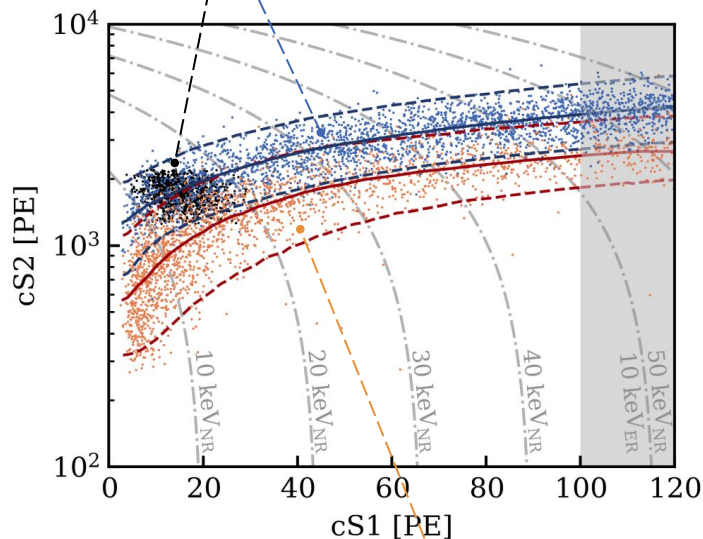


- Bosonic DM
- Gamma
- Beta
- Neutrino elastic scattering

$$\left(\frac{S2}{S1}\right)_{NR} < \left(\frac{S2}{S1}\right)_{ER}$$

ER calibrations:

- ^{37}Ar
- ^{220}Rn



NR calibrations:

- $^{241}\text{AmBe}$ neutron source

Science Data Overview



XENON

Upgrades and Status

SR0->SR1:

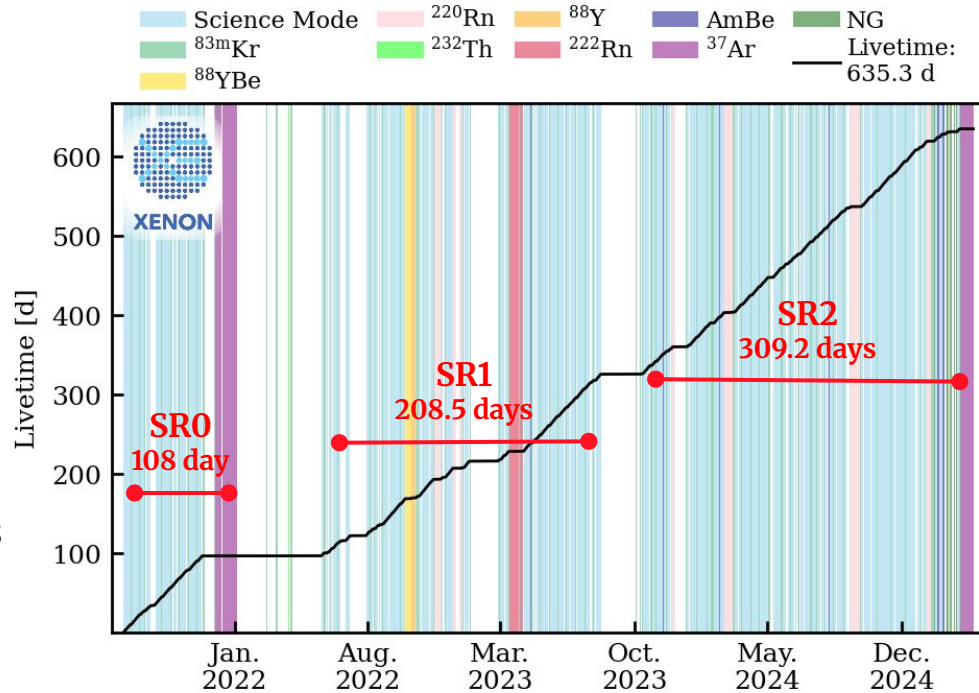
Liquid radon distillation, $1.8 \rightarrow 0.9$ $\mu\text{Bq/kg}$

SR1->SR2:

Injected Gd into the neutron Cherenkov veto

SR2-> SR3:

Detector upgrade since early 2025 to enhance the drift field and fix flashing PMTs

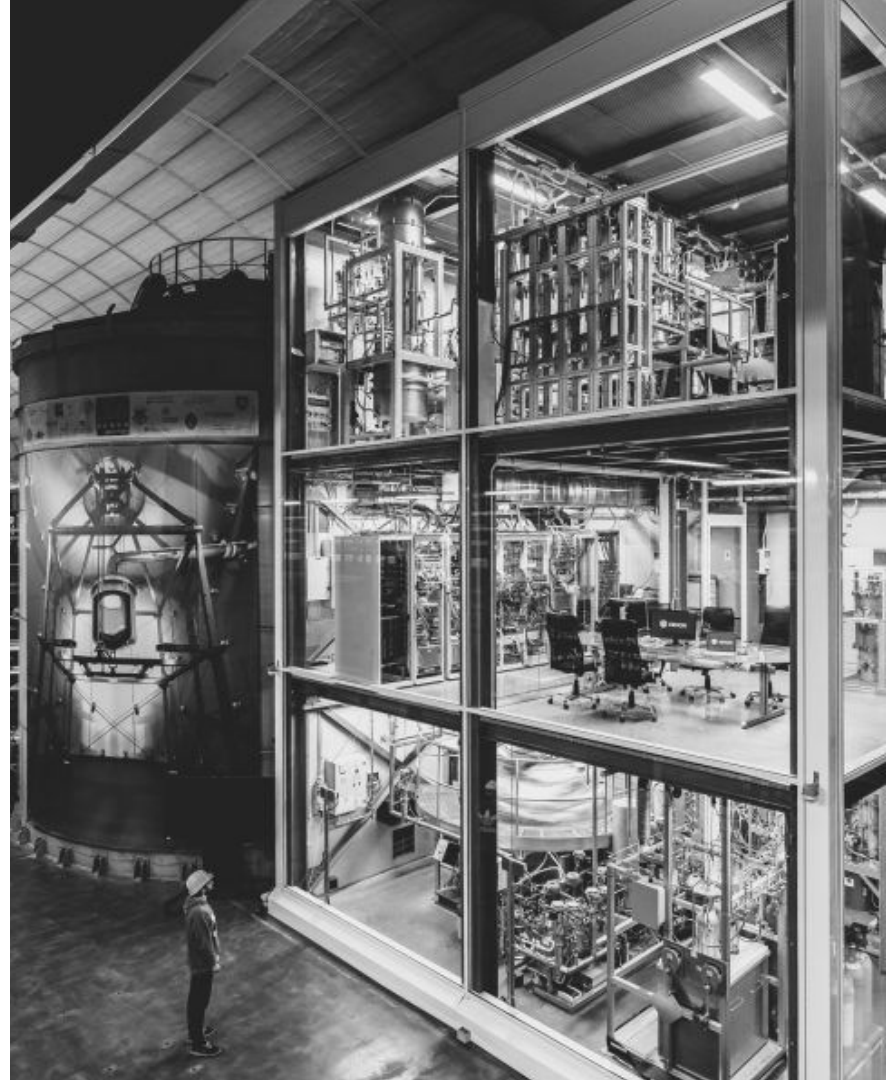


Me inside the neutron veto

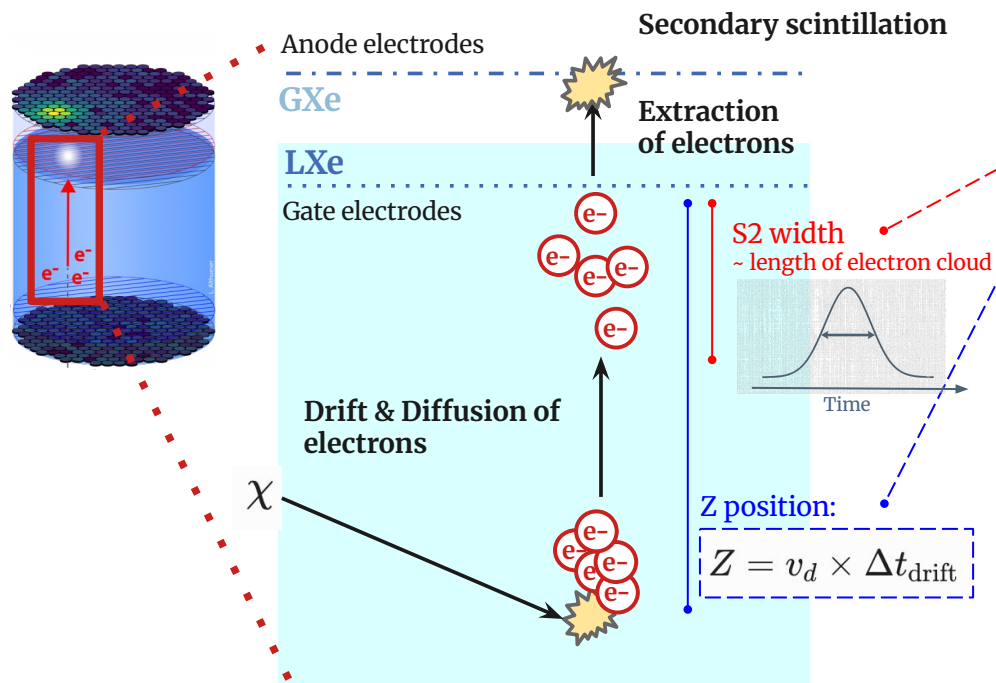
03.

Analysis of S2 Pulse Shape

- General purpose analysis
- Electron drift & diffusion
- S2 width simulations
- S2 width cuts



Motivation & Outline



01. Parameters calibration:

- Drift velocity v_{drift}
- Diffusion constant D_l

Input

02. S2 width simulation

Input

03. S2 width cuts

General analysis:

Detector dynamics tracking & Background rejection

S2-only analysis:

Main discriminator for signal vs. background

Parameters Calibrations

01. Parameters calibration:

- Drift velocity v_{drift}
- Diffusion constant D_l

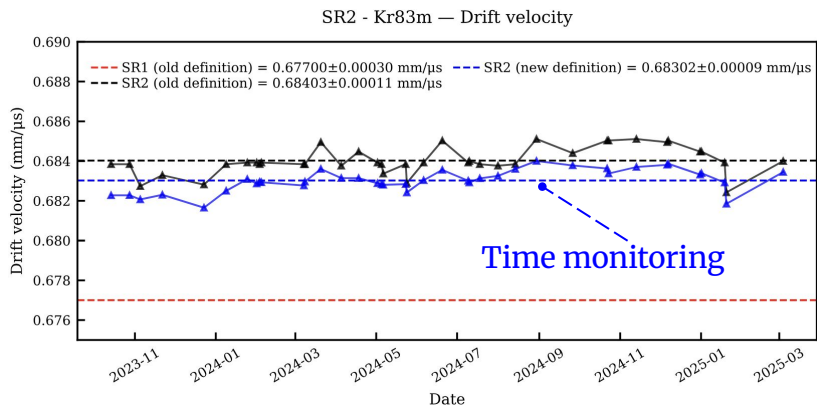
Internal $^{83}\text{m}\text{Kr}$ calibration dataset (uniformly distributed in detector)

Drift Velocity

$$v_d = \frac{z_{\text{gate}} - z_{\text{cathode}}}{t_{\text{cathode}} - t_{\text{gate}}}$$

Maximum drift length

Maximum drift time



Diffusion constant

$$r_{50}^{\text{mod}}(t) = 1.349\sigma = 1.349 \sqrt{\frac{2D \cdot (t - t_{\text{gate}})}{v^2} + scw^2}$$

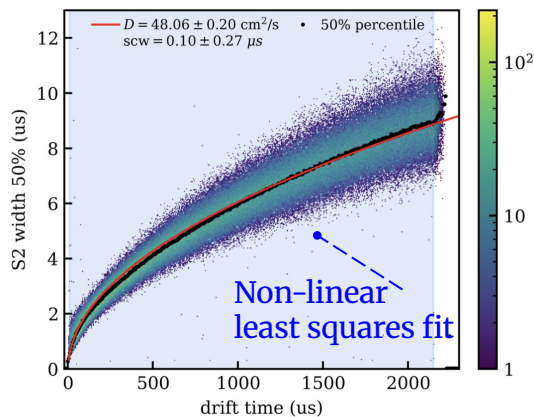
S2 width

Drift time

Gate drift time

Drift velocity

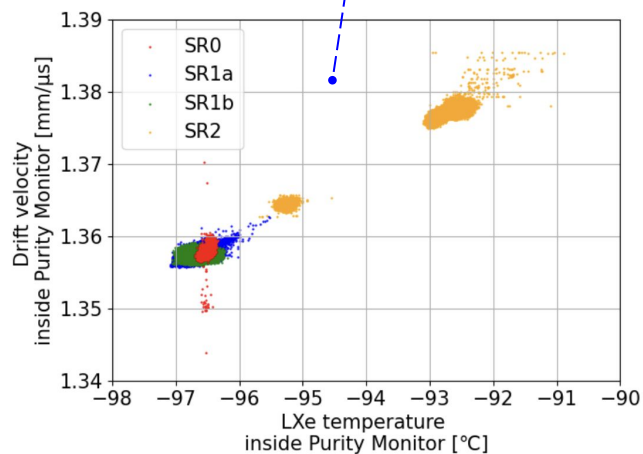
Single electron width



Parameters Calibrations

Key dependences:

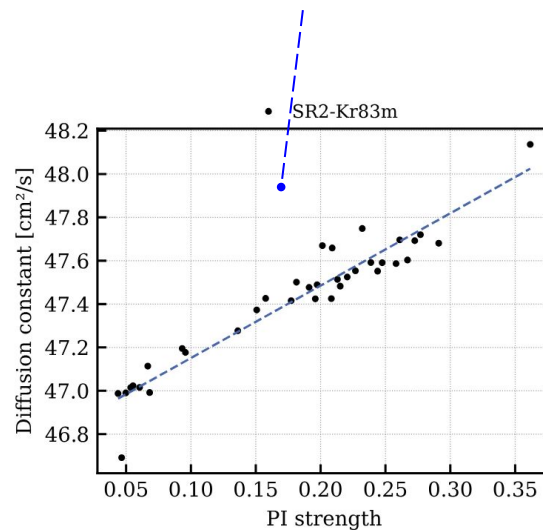
1. The primary dependency **drift field** is constant during the data taking period
2. The **temperature** increase can explain the macroscopic increase in drift velocity



01. Parameters calibration:

- Drift velocity v_{drift}
- Diffusion constant D_l

3. **Photoionization (PI)** of impurities introduces single electrons that merge into the S2 waveform
⇒ larger fitted diffusion constant



S2 Width Simulations

02. S2 width simulation:

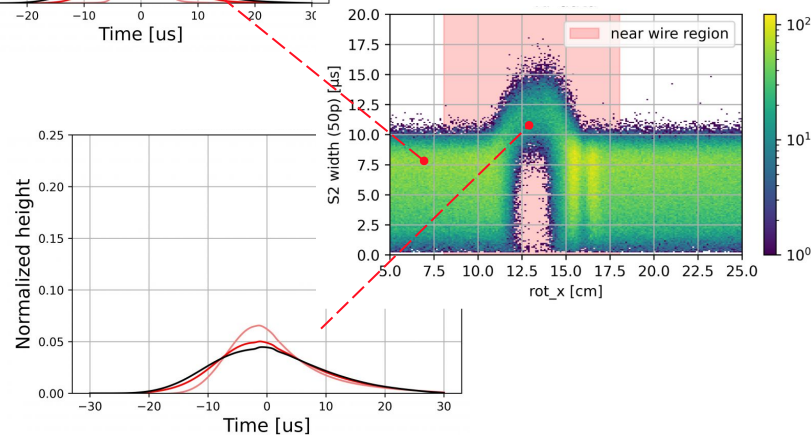
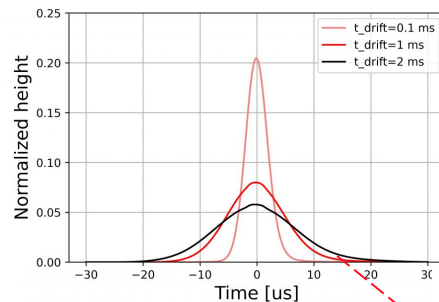
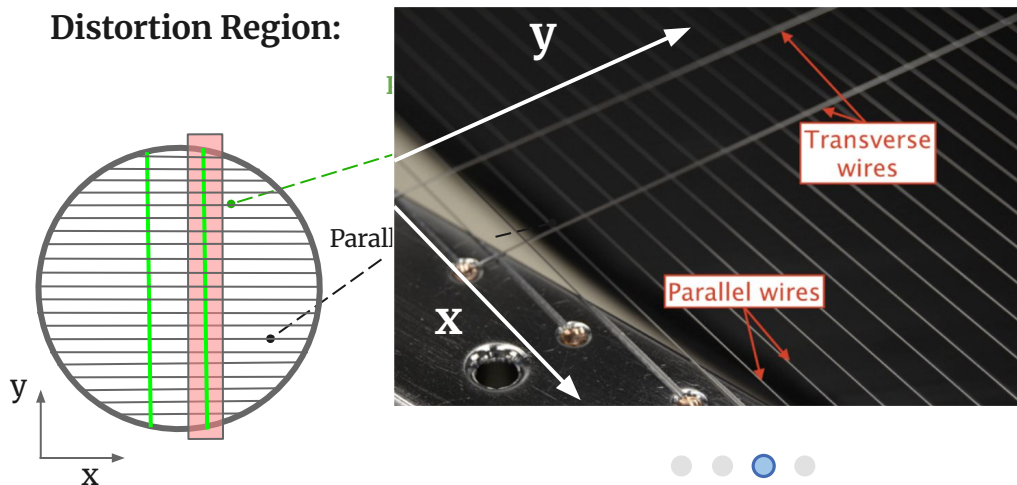
- **Standard S2 width modeling**
- Dealing with wire field distortions

Standard Region:

Electrons undergo longitudinal diffusion in a uniform field.
Arrival times follow a normal distribution:

$$t_{\text{drift},i} \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu_{\text{drift}}, D_l)$$

Distortion Region:

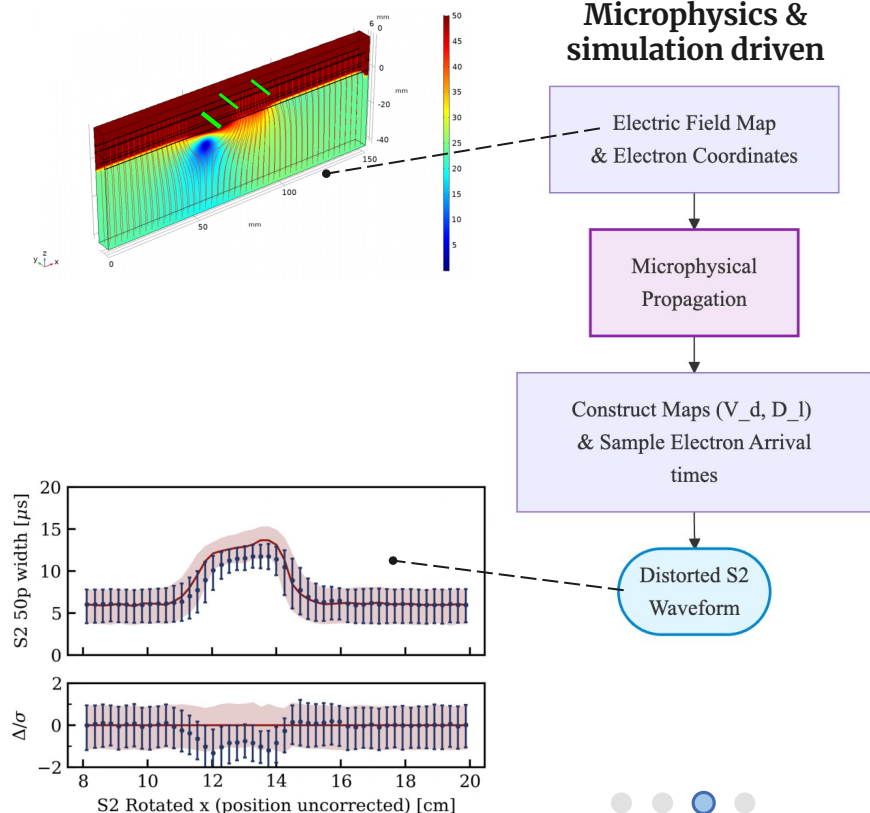


S2 Width Simulations

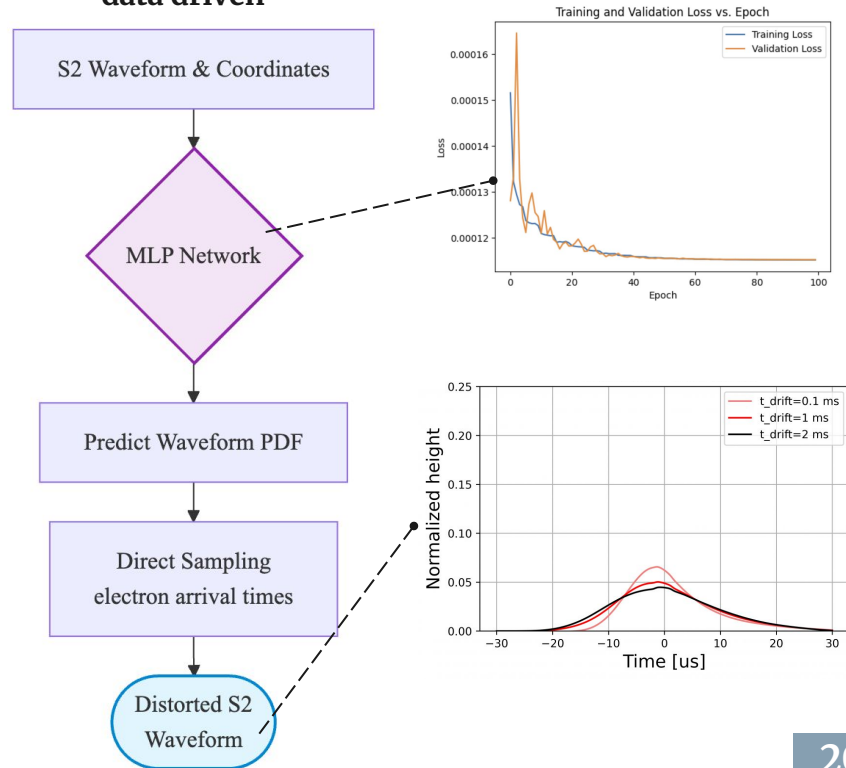
02. S2 width simulation:

- Standard S2 width modeling
- **Dealing with wire field distortions**

Microphysics & simulation driven



Machine Learning & data driven



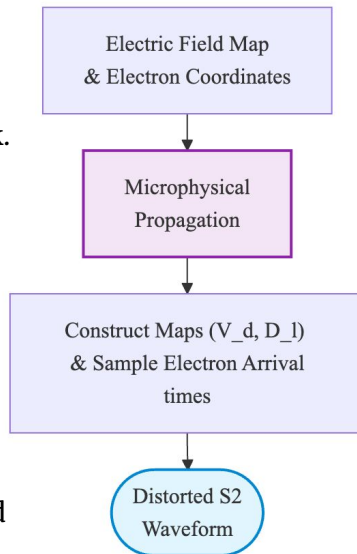
S2 Width Simulations

02. S2 width simulation:
- Standard S2 width modeling
 - **Dealing with wire field distortions**



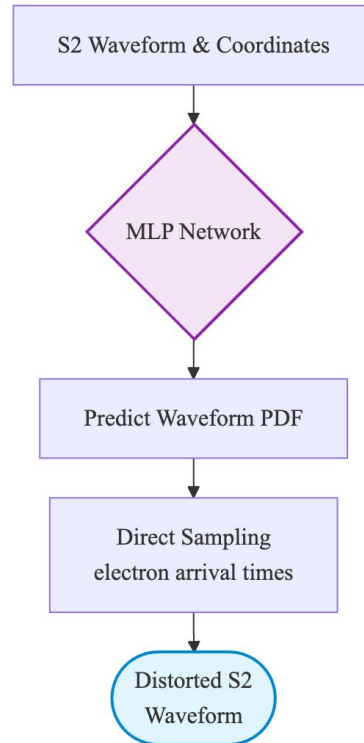
- Built on **first principles**.
- **Compatible** with simulation framework.
- Parameters can be **tuned** for varying detector conditions.

Microphysics & simulation driven



- Mismatch of field models with **real world** (e.g., wire sagging).
- Uses v_d and D_l in **uncalibrated** high-field regions.

Machine Learning & data driven

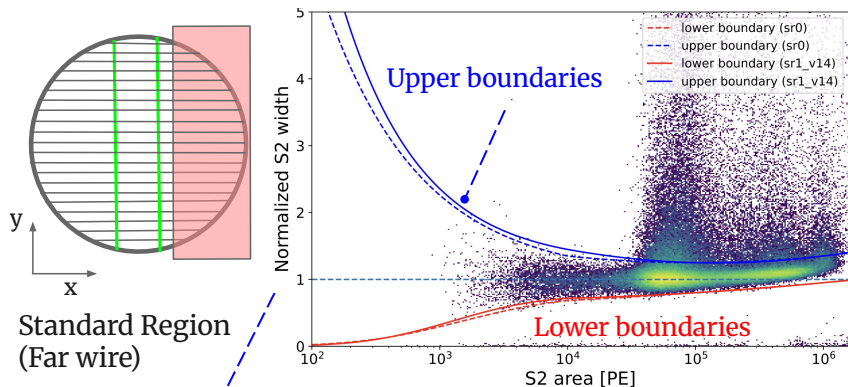


- **Bypasses complex** diffusion models.
- Naturally **matches** data.

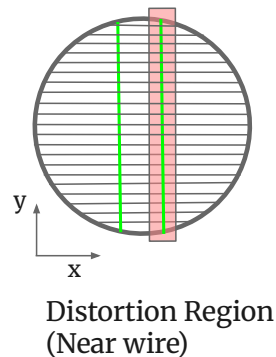
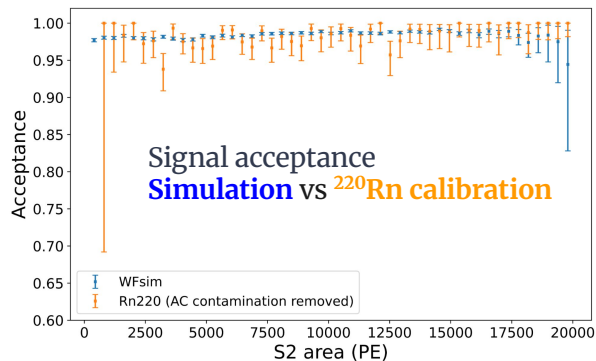


- **Black-box**
- **Systematic Bias**: Trained on observed features rather than true features.

S2 Width Cuts



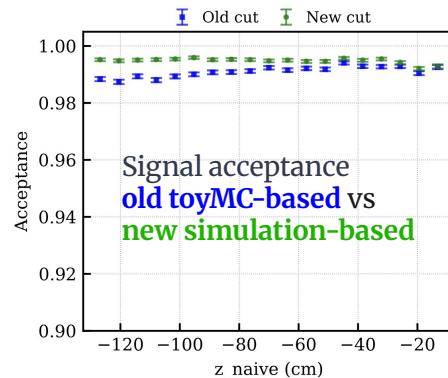
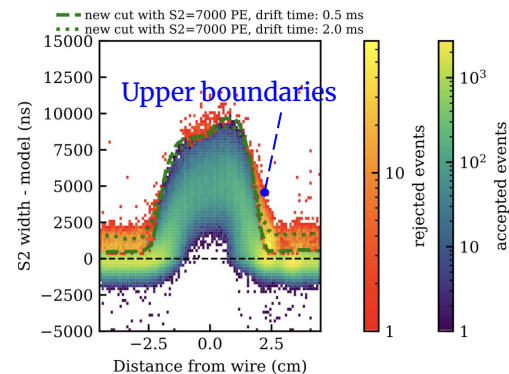
Observation
Model



03. S2 width cuts:

- Simulation & machine learning based cuts
- Background rejection

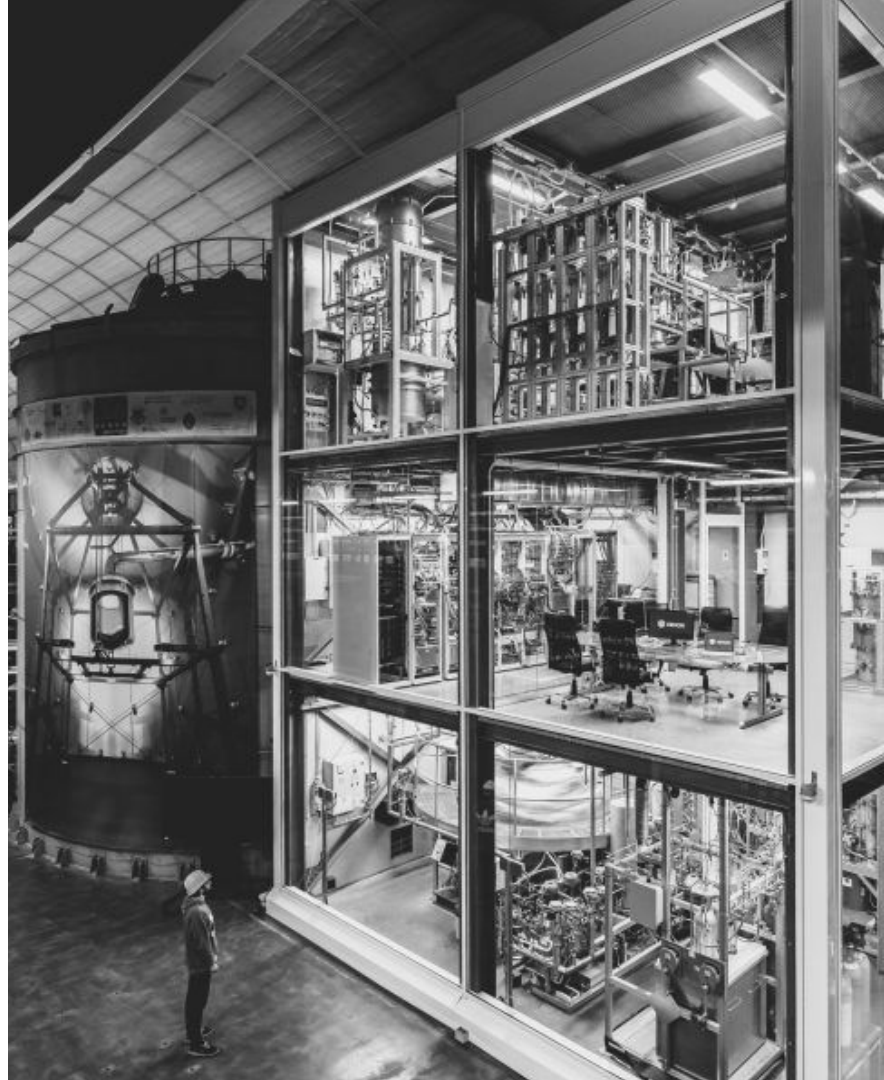
To remove **gas event, accidental coincidence event**



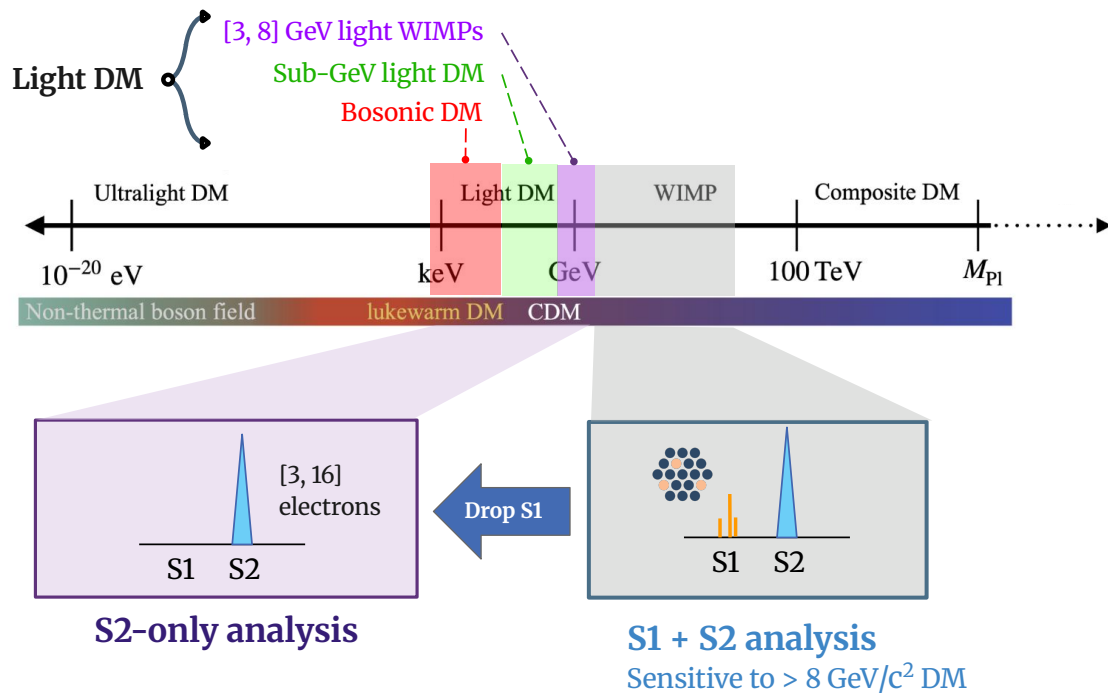
04.

Search for Light Dark Matter using S2-only Data

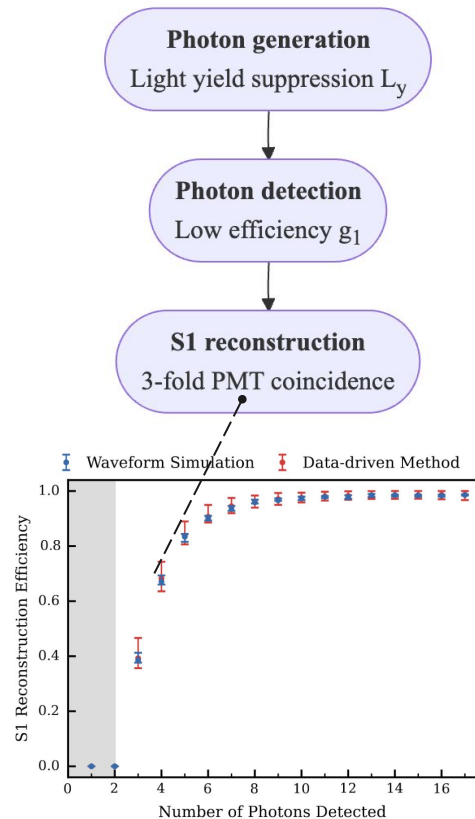
- Motivation & Challenges
- Background Model
- Signal Model
- Limits on light dark matter model



Motivation of S2-only analysis

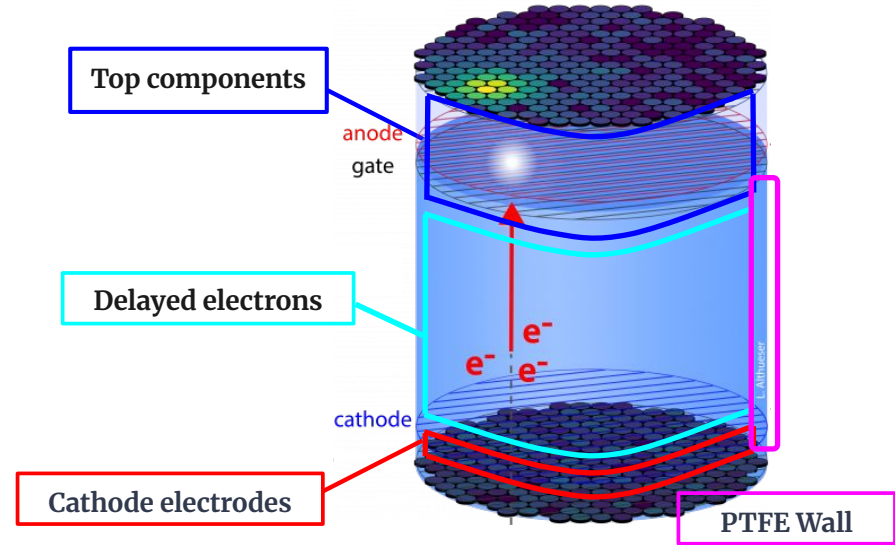
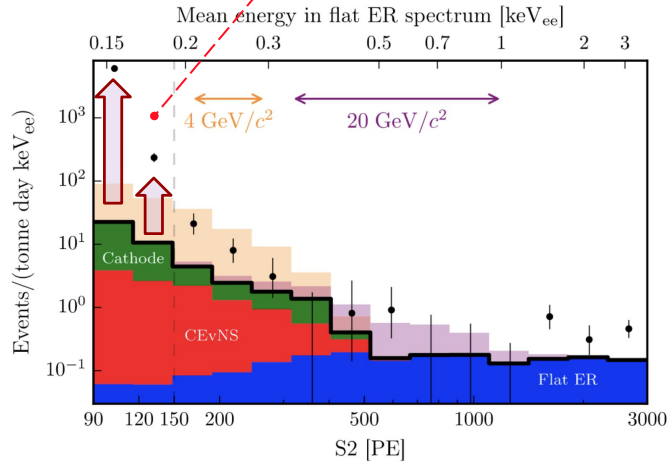


S1 fails for Light Dark Matter



Challenges of S2-only analysis

- Losing S1 to reconstruct the **depth** (Z-coordinate)
- Losing **ER/NR** discrimination using the S2/S1 ratio
- **Unmodeled instrumental backgrounds** at low energies



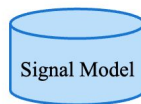
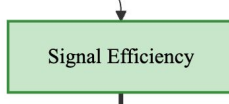
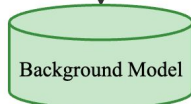
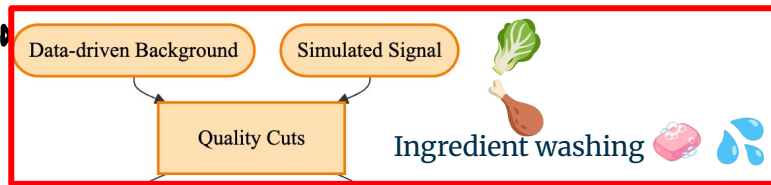
The S2-only recipe



XENON

Stage 1:

Ingredient Preparation

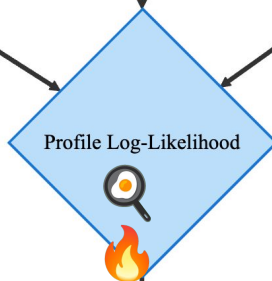


Template prepared



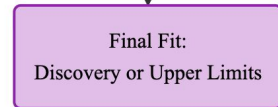
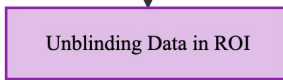
Stage 2:

Statistical cooking



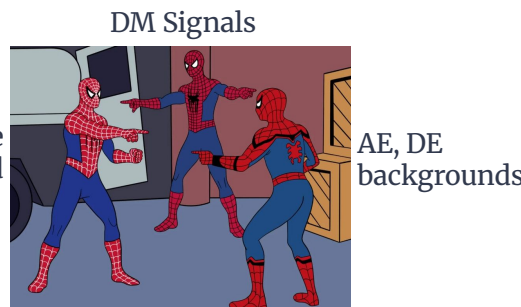
Stage 3:

Food serving

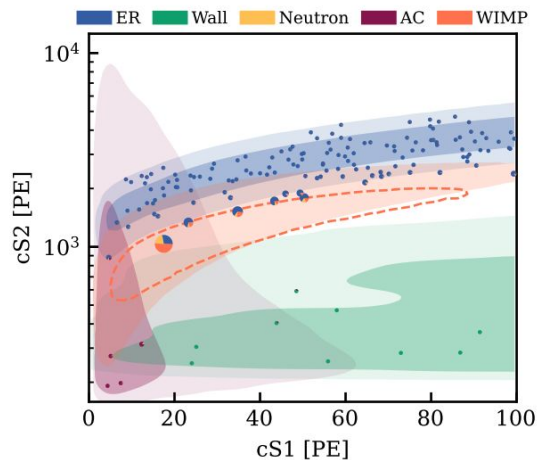


Backgrounds | Discrimination Space

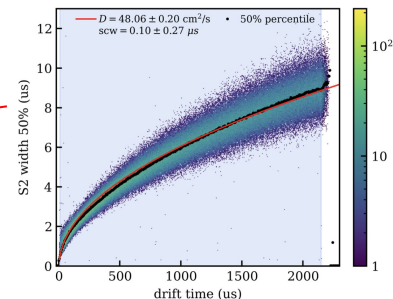
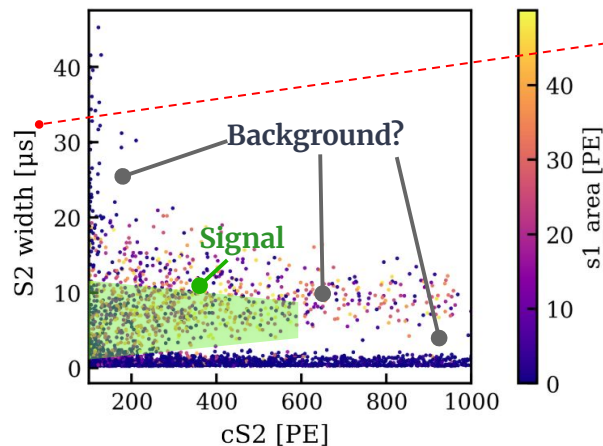
Losing the S2/S1 discrimination space
⇒ novel **background discrimination space**



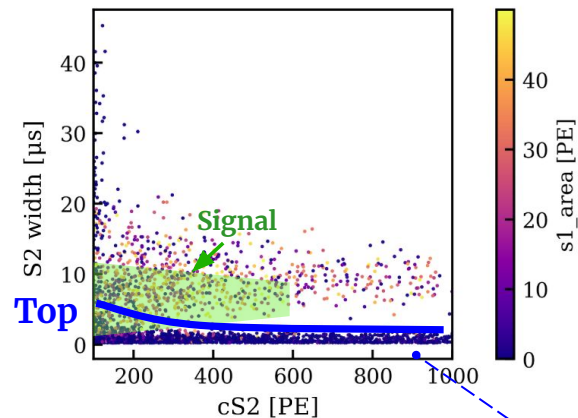
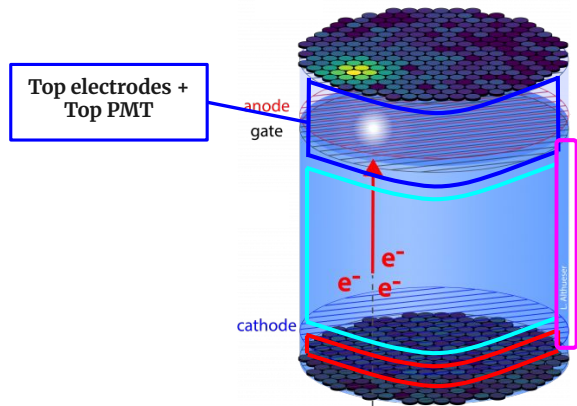
S1+S2 analysis



S2-only analysis



Backgrounds | 01. Top regions

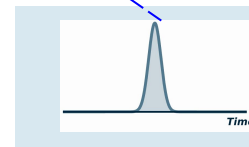
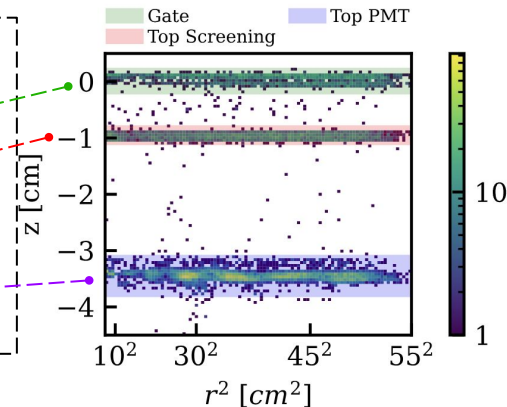


Background origin:

Top electrodes (Plated out radioactivity from ^{222}Rn decay chain)

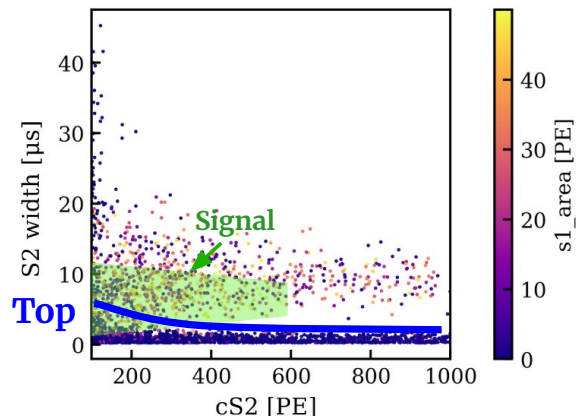
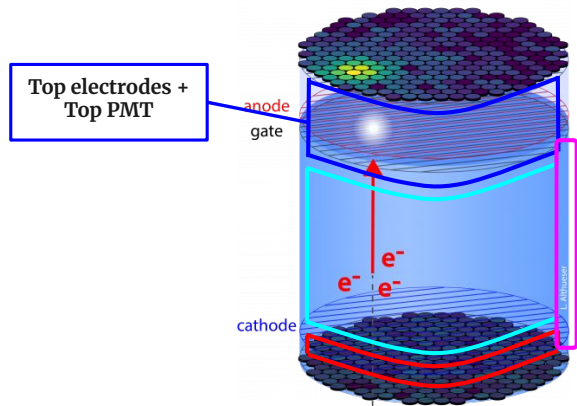
- Gate
- Top screening

Top PMTs (Radioactivity from Photocathode & Kovar flanges)



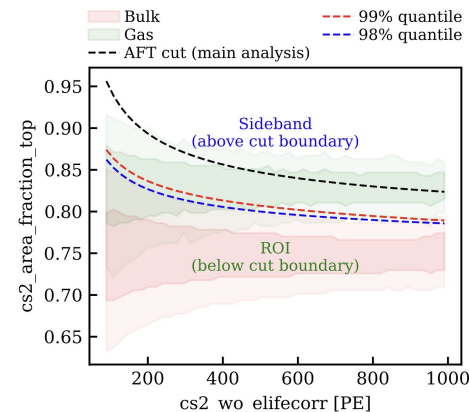
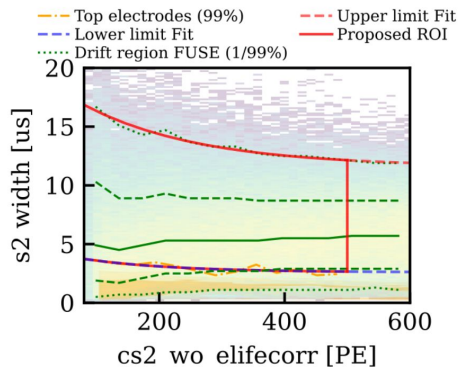
S2 width < 3 μ s due to smaller diffusion

Backgrounds | 01. Top regions

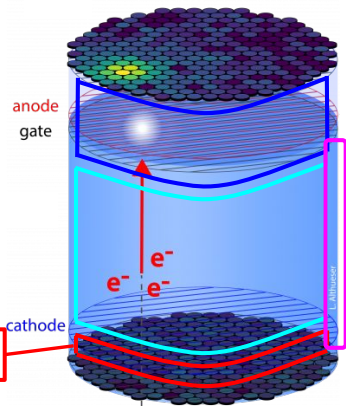


Background rejection:

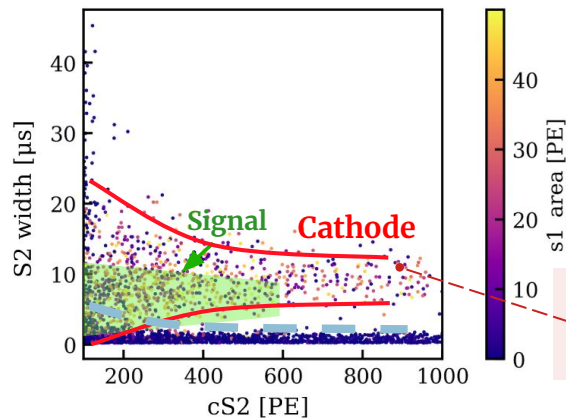
- **S2 width:** reject narrow pulses
- **S2 light distribution:** Selects events with liquid-like top/bottom ratios
 - ~99% signal acceptance.
- Temporal veto
- At **negligible** level after cuts



Backgrounds | 02. Cathode



Cathode electrodes



S2 width ~ 10 μ s
large overlap with signal region

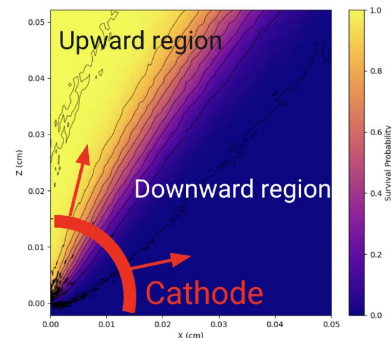
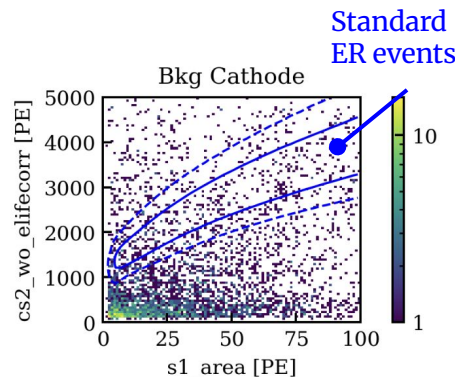
Background origin:

Plated out radioactivity from ^{222}Rn decay chain onto the cathode

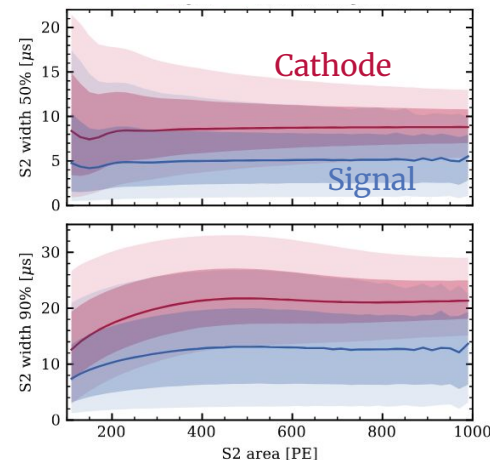
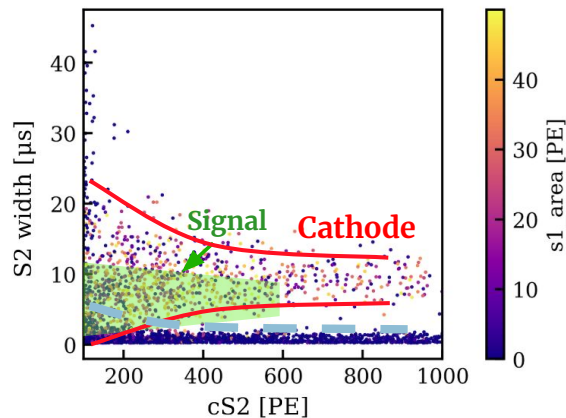
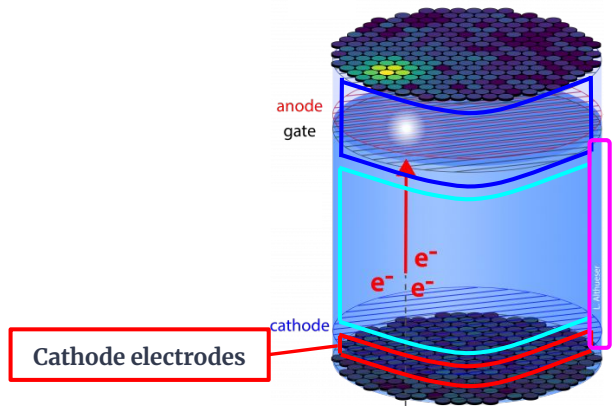
- beta decay from ^{210}Pb ($Q=63.5$ keV) and daughters

Cathode events suffer strong **photon and charge loss**:

- S1: Strong field $\Rightarrow$ Suppression of electron-ion recombination + optical effect
- S2: Electrons drifting following downward electric fields lines

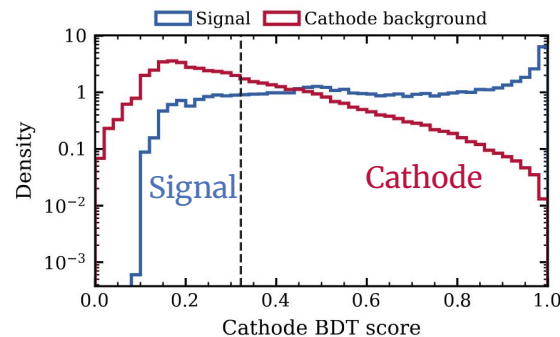


Backgrounds | 02. Cathode

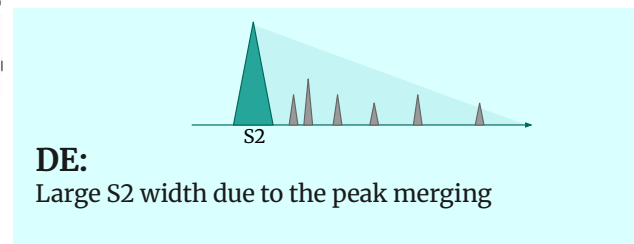
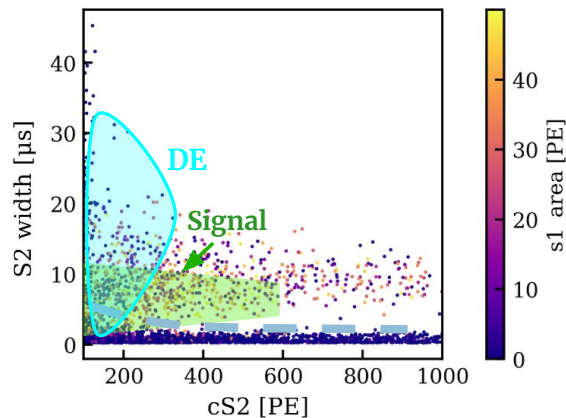
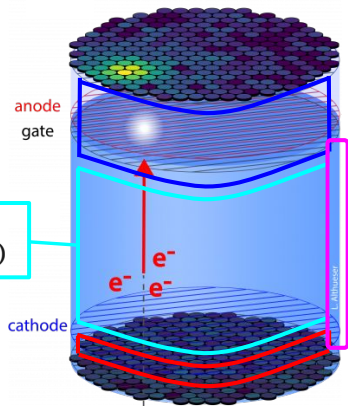


Background rejection:

- S2 width (upper boundary)
- **Boosted Decision Tree (BDT) classifier**
 - S2 pulse features (width 50%, 90% etc)
 - Cathode rejection: ~50%, signal acceptance: ~80%
- Temporal veto
 - Cathode rejection: ~14%, signal acceptance: 99.5%



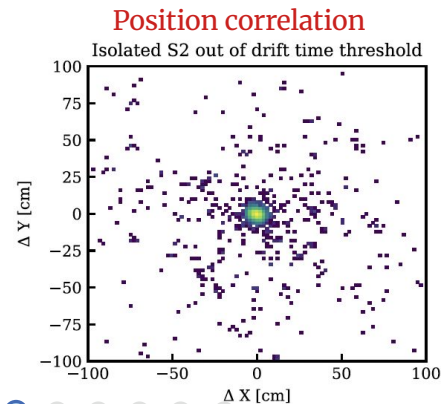
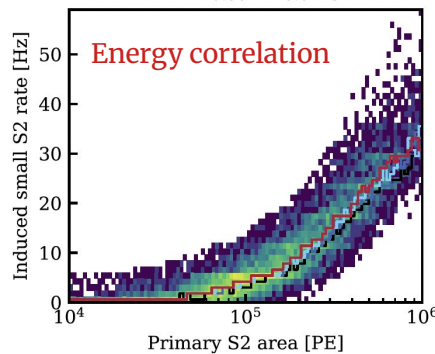
Backgrounds | 03. Delayed Electrons (DE)



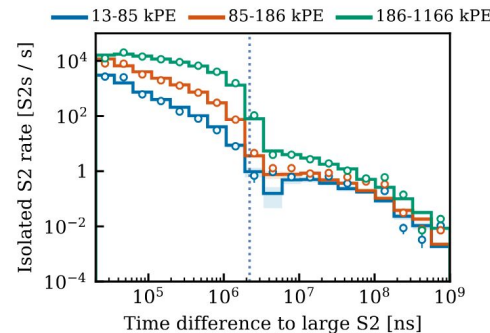
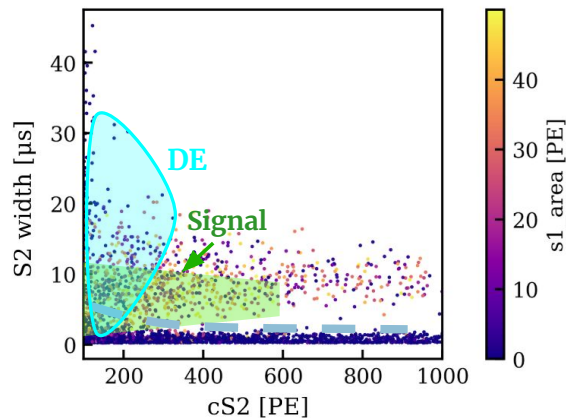
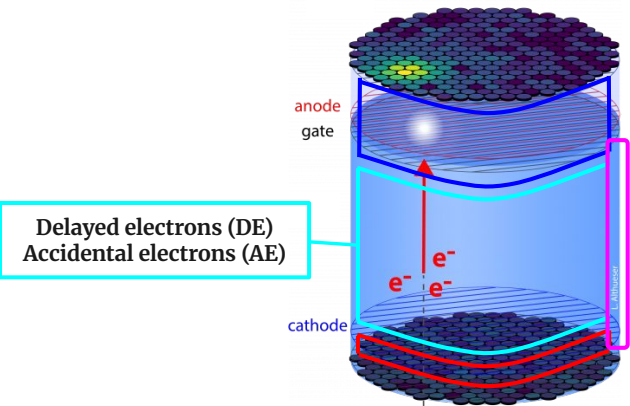
Background origin:

Electrons of high-energy event captured by impurities in LXe, and emitted afterwards up to 1s

Position and time correlated with primary S2



Backgrounds | 03. Delayed Electrons (DE)



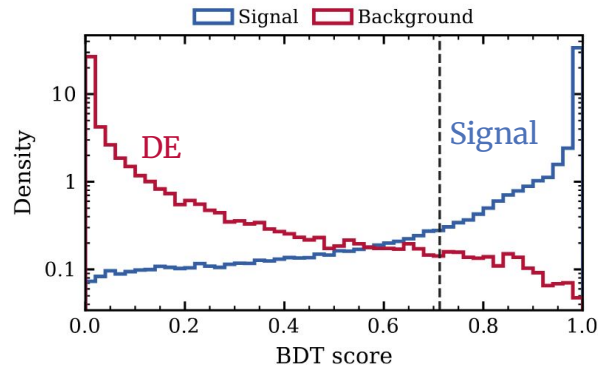
Background rejection:

Generative ML model Conditional Normalizing Flow (CNF)

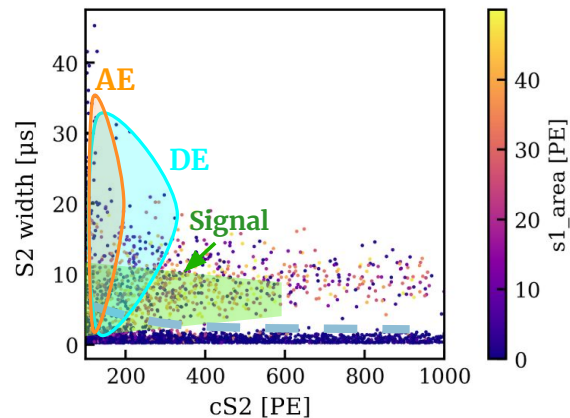
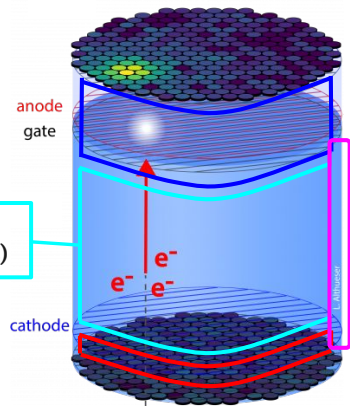
- Learns high-dimensional PDF of delayed trains
- Calculates CNF Score for observed isolated S2s

BDT classifier based on waveform features + CNF score

- DE rejection: 98%, signal acceptance: 80%



Backgrounds | 04. Accidental Electrons (AE)

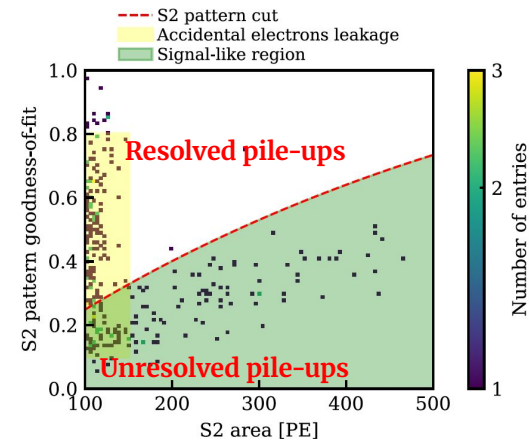
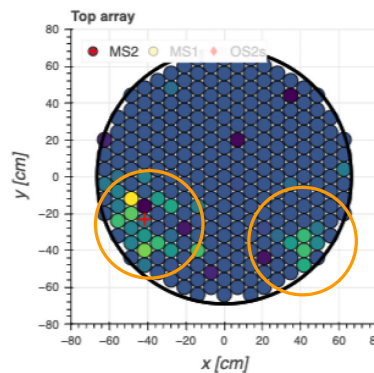


Background origin:

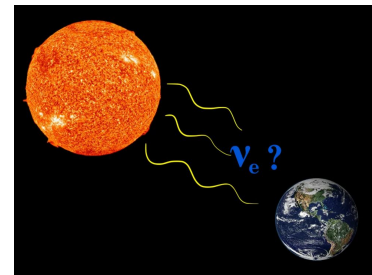
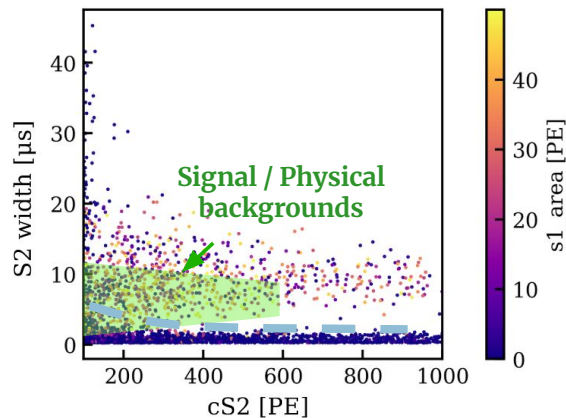
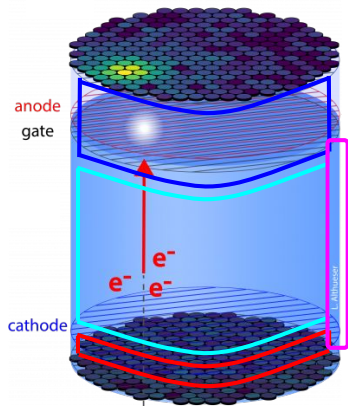
Random temporal pile-up of delayed single electrons (SE)

Background rejection:

Comparison of observed **hit patterns** against neural-network optical maps, >98% acceptance



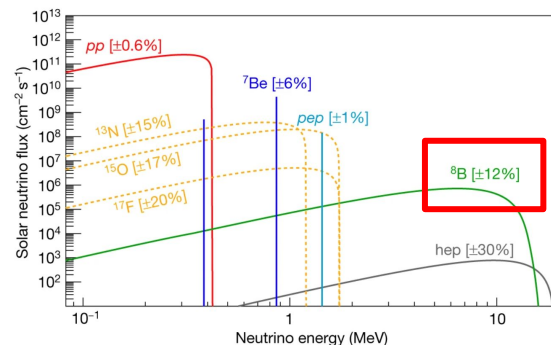
Backgrounds | 05. Physical background



1. ^8B solar neutrino Coherent Elastic Neutrino-Nucleus Scattering (CEvNS) signal

- Neutrino Flux from the SNO (Sudbury Neutrino Observatory) experiment.
- Energy distribution from standard ^8B nuclear decay spectrum.
- Cross-Section from Standard Model interaction.

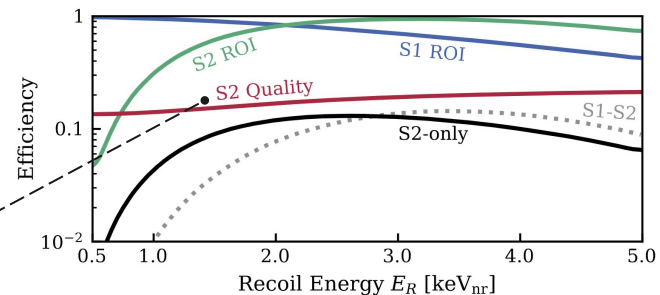
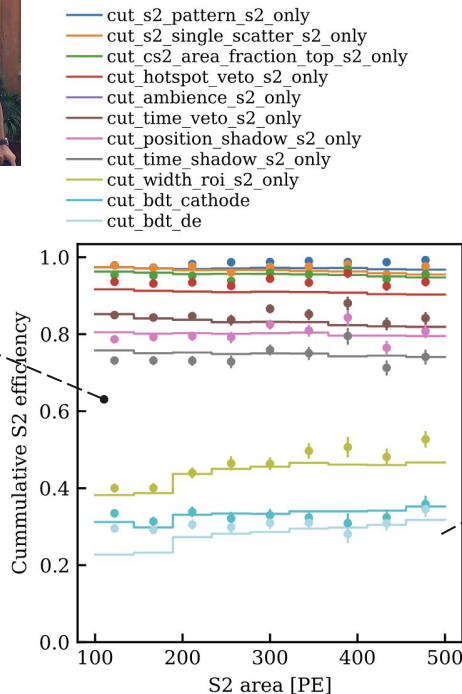
2. NR from neutron
3. ER from radioactivity



Cut efficiency



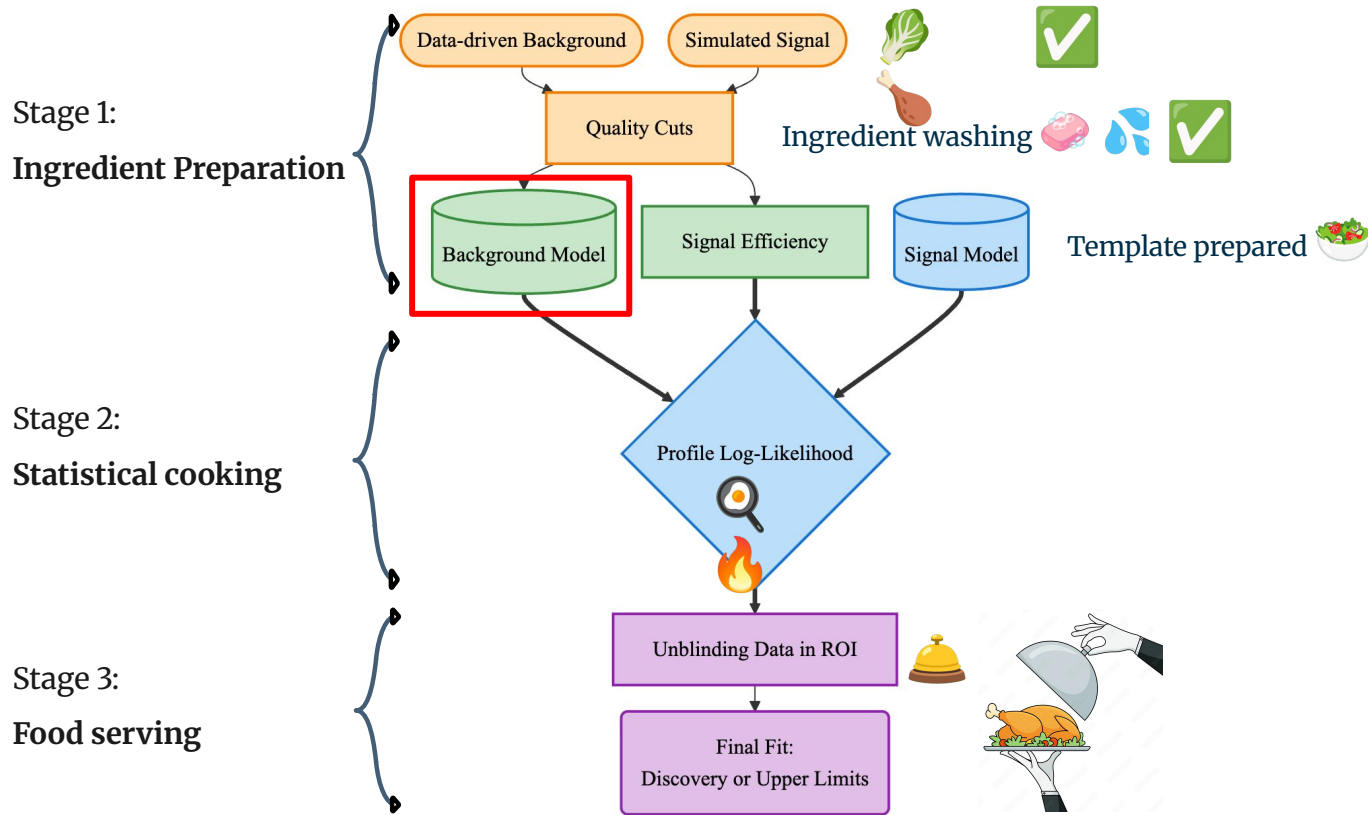
1. **Salting:** Simulate DM-like S2 peaks and inject these peaks into real science data.
2. Calculate **survival fraction** as total efficiency.
3. **Efficiency gain** (up to 5x) below 3 keV_{nr} compared to traditional S1+S2 searches.
4. **Energy Reach** $[0.5, 5.0] \text{ keV}_{nr}$ and $[0.04, 0.7] \text{ keV}_{ee}$



The S2-only recipe



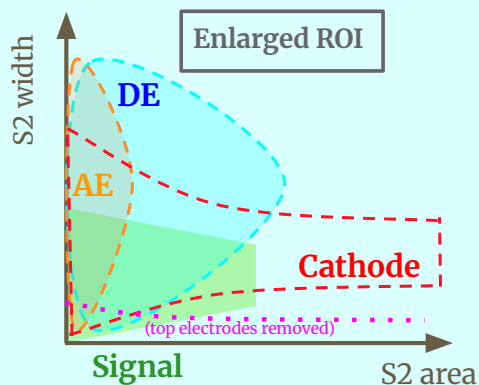
XENON



Background Modeling | Blinded Analysis

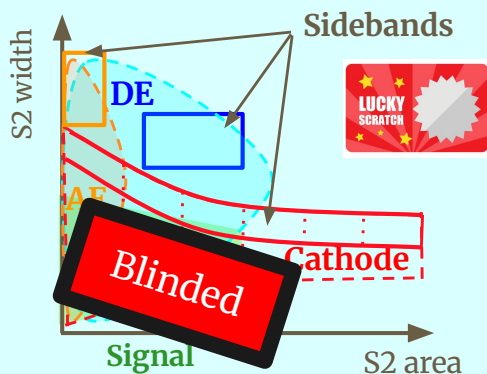
Data-driven modeling:

DE, AE, cathode background modeling in full space



Sideband technique:

Unblind science data in sideband region, extrapolate the background modeling to **Signal ROI**.



Backgrounds	Modeling	Sideband	σ
Cathode	BDT Sideband	Main selection on background discrimination space	7-15 %
Delayed Electron (DE)	ML Generative		13-40 %
Accidental Electron (AE)	Data-driven		8-17 %
CEvNS (Physics)	First Principles	-	~4%

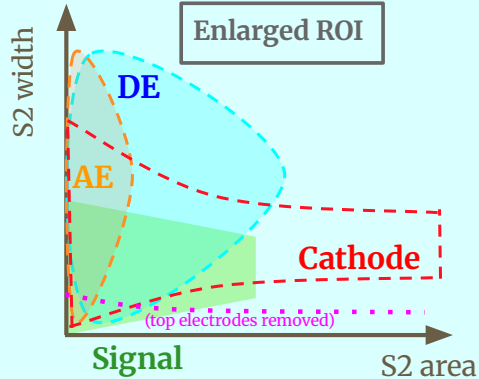
Background Modeling



XENON

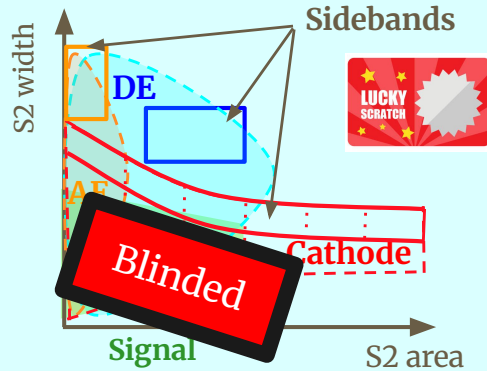
Data-driven modeling:

DE, AE, cathode background modeling in full space



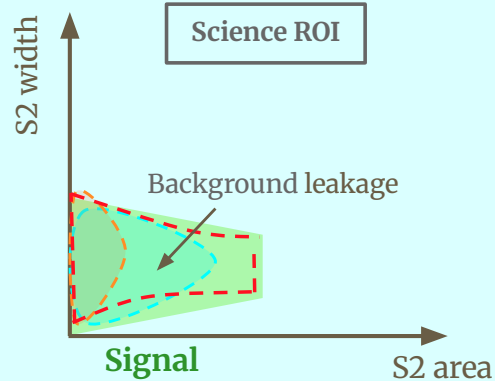
Sideband technique:

Unblind science data in sideband region, extrapolate the background modeling to **Signal ROI**.

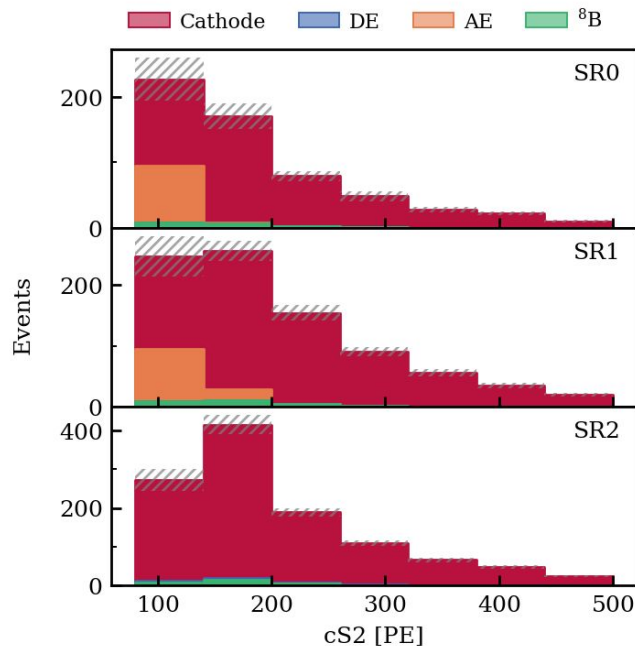


Final Background Model

Estimate the DE, AE, cathode background in **blinded Signal ROI**

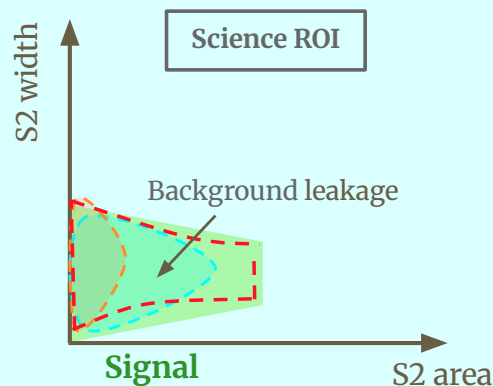


Background Summary



Final Background Model

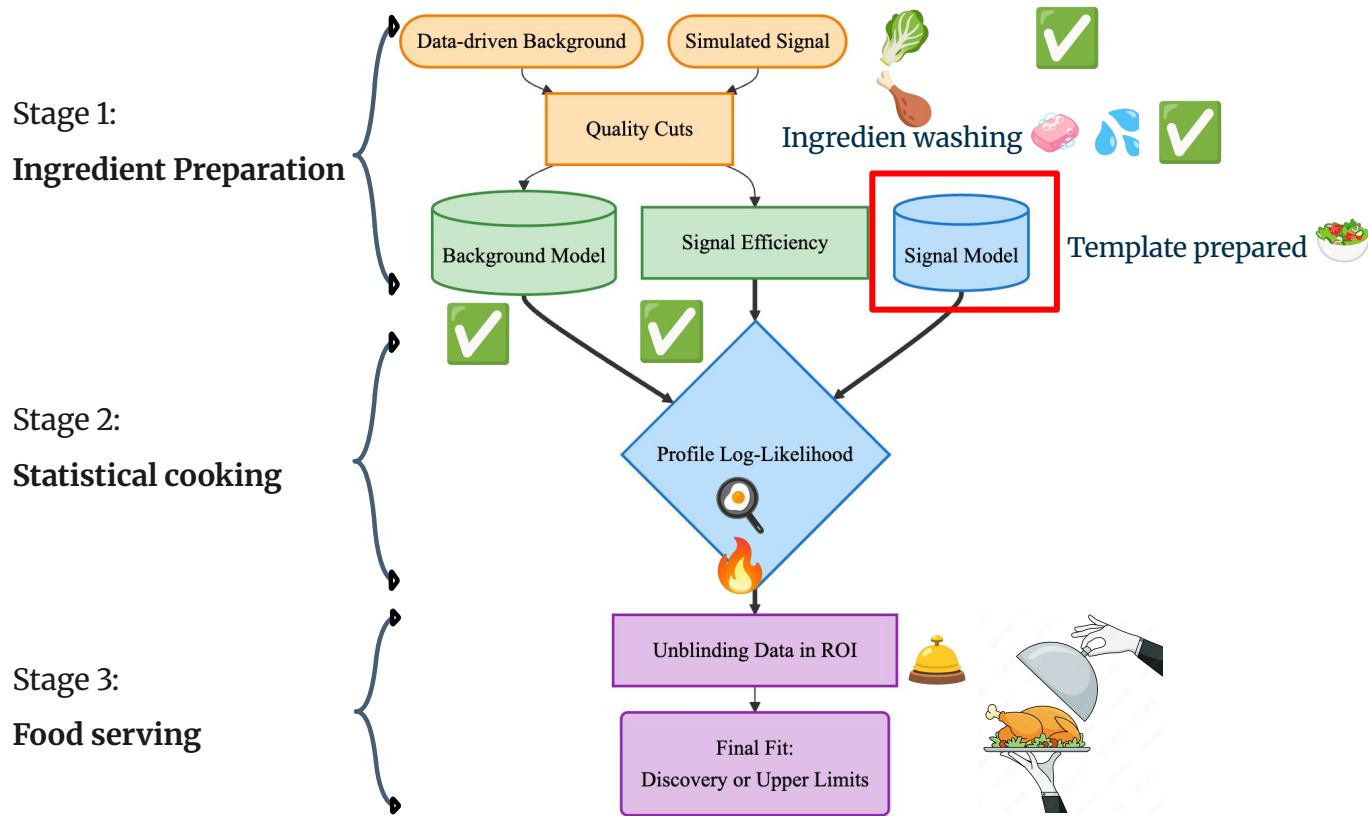
Estimate the **DE**, **AE**, **cathode** background in **blinded Signal ROI**



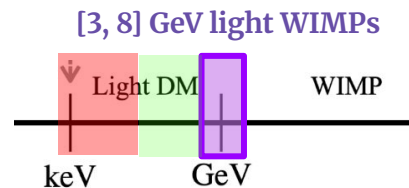
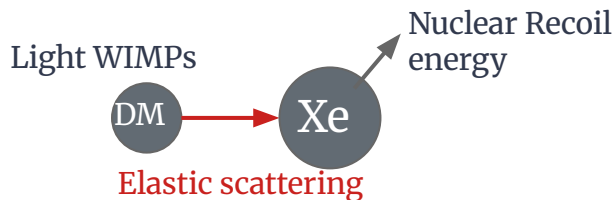
The S2-only recipe



XENON



Signal Model | Nuclear Recoil

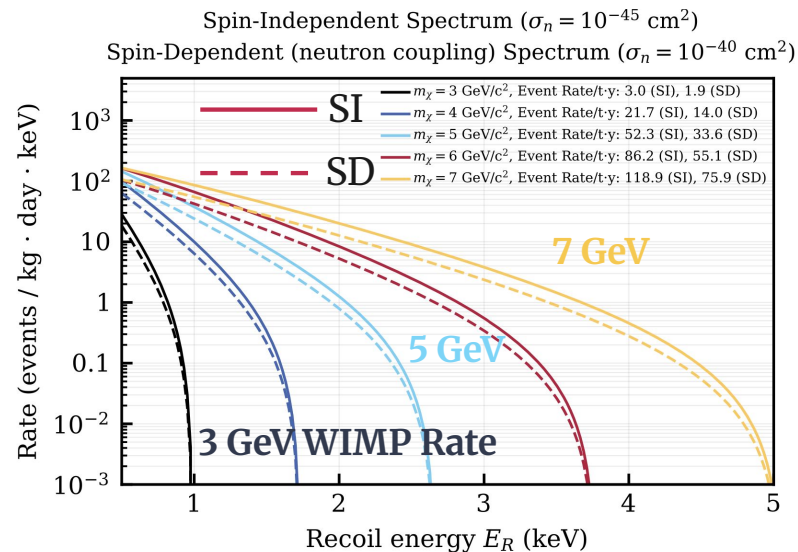


$$\frac{dR}{dE_R} = \frac{\rho_0}{m_\chi m_{\text{Xe}}} \int_{v_{\min}}^{v_{\max}} f(v) v \frac{d\sigma_{\chi-\text{Xe}}(v)}{dE_R} dv$$

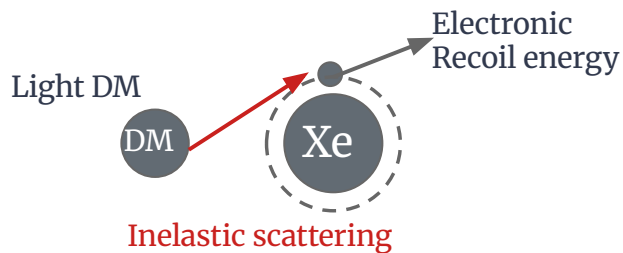
DM & Xe Properties

DM Velocity

Model Dependent Cross section

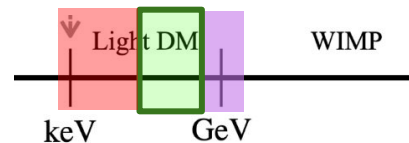


Signal Model | Electronic Recoil

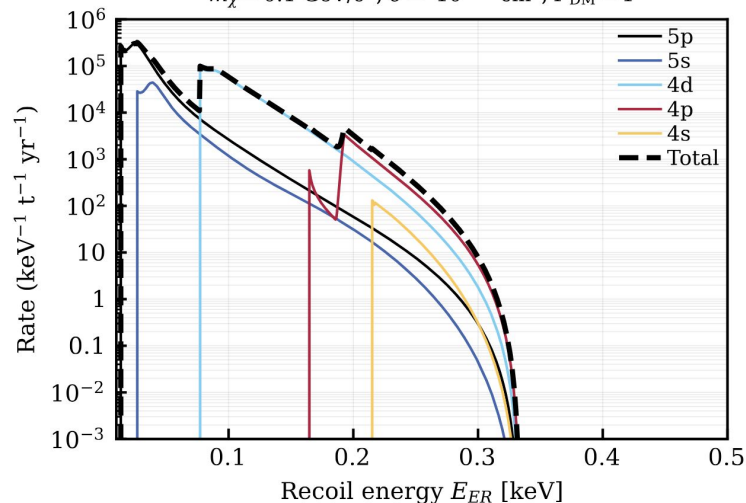


$$\frac{dR}{d \ln E_{er}} = \underbrace{\frac{N_{Xe} \rho_\chi}{m_\chi}}_{\text{DM \& Xe Properties}} \cdot \underbrace{\frac{\sigma_e}{8\mu_{\chi e}^2}}_{\text{DM Velocity}} \cdot \underbrace{\int q dq \eta(v_{\min}) \cdot |F_{DM}(q)|^2}_{\text{Form Factor related to mediator}} \cdot \underbrace{\mathcal{A}(E, q)}_{\text{Atomic Response Term}}$$

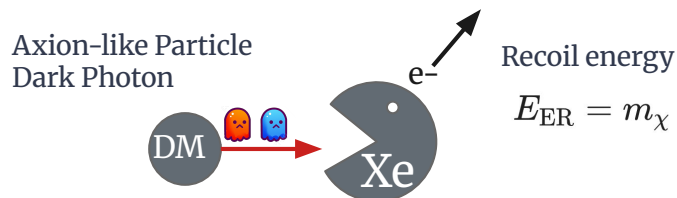
[50, 1000] MeV light DM



Electronic recoil (QEdark)
 $m_\chi = 0.1 \text{ GeV}/c^2$, $\sigma = 10^{-40} \text{ cm}^2$, $F_{DM} = 1$



Signal Model | Absorption of bosonic DM



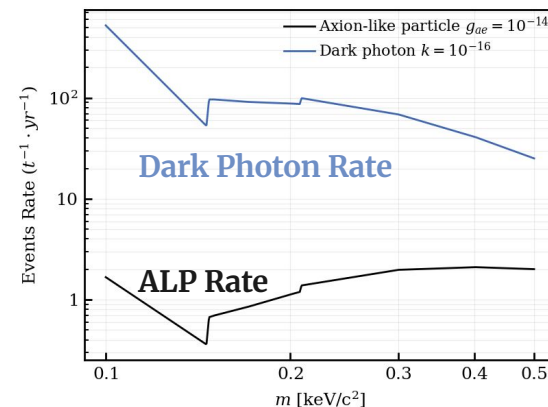
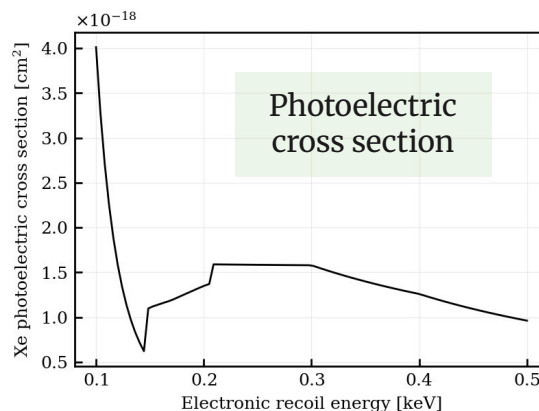
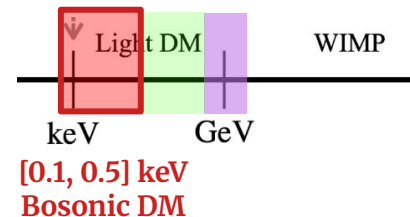
Absorption
(Axio-electric or
kinetic mixing + photo-electric)

$$R_{DP} \propto k^2 \cdot \frac{\sigma_{PE}}{m_{DP}}$$

Kinetic Mixing constant

$$R_{ALP} \propto g_{ae}^2 \cdot m_{ALP} \cdot \sigma_{PE}$$

Axio-electric coupling constant



Signal Model | Signal spectrum

Recoil Energy Spectrum

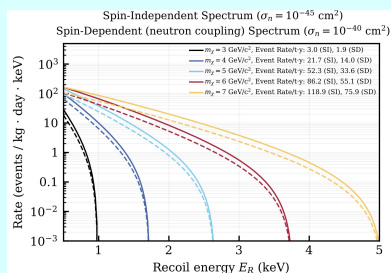


- Charge Yield
- Signal Efficiency

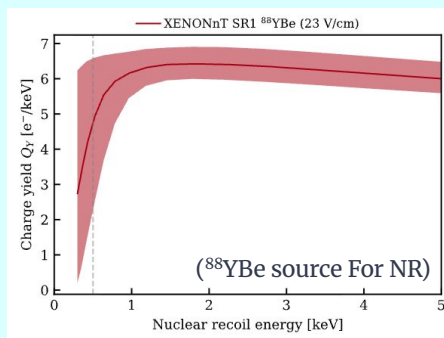


Signal Prediction

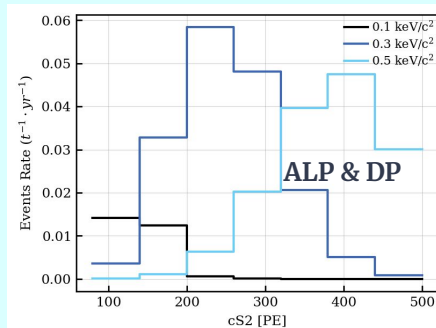
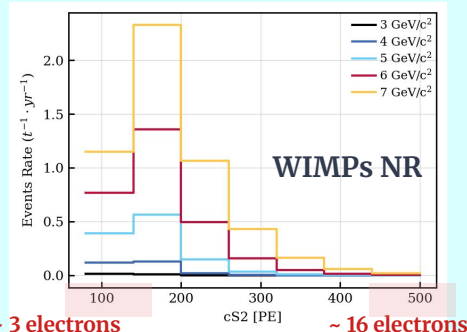
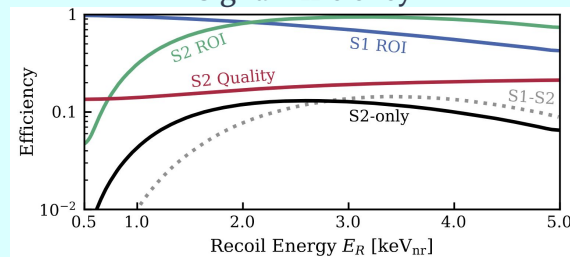
Light DM



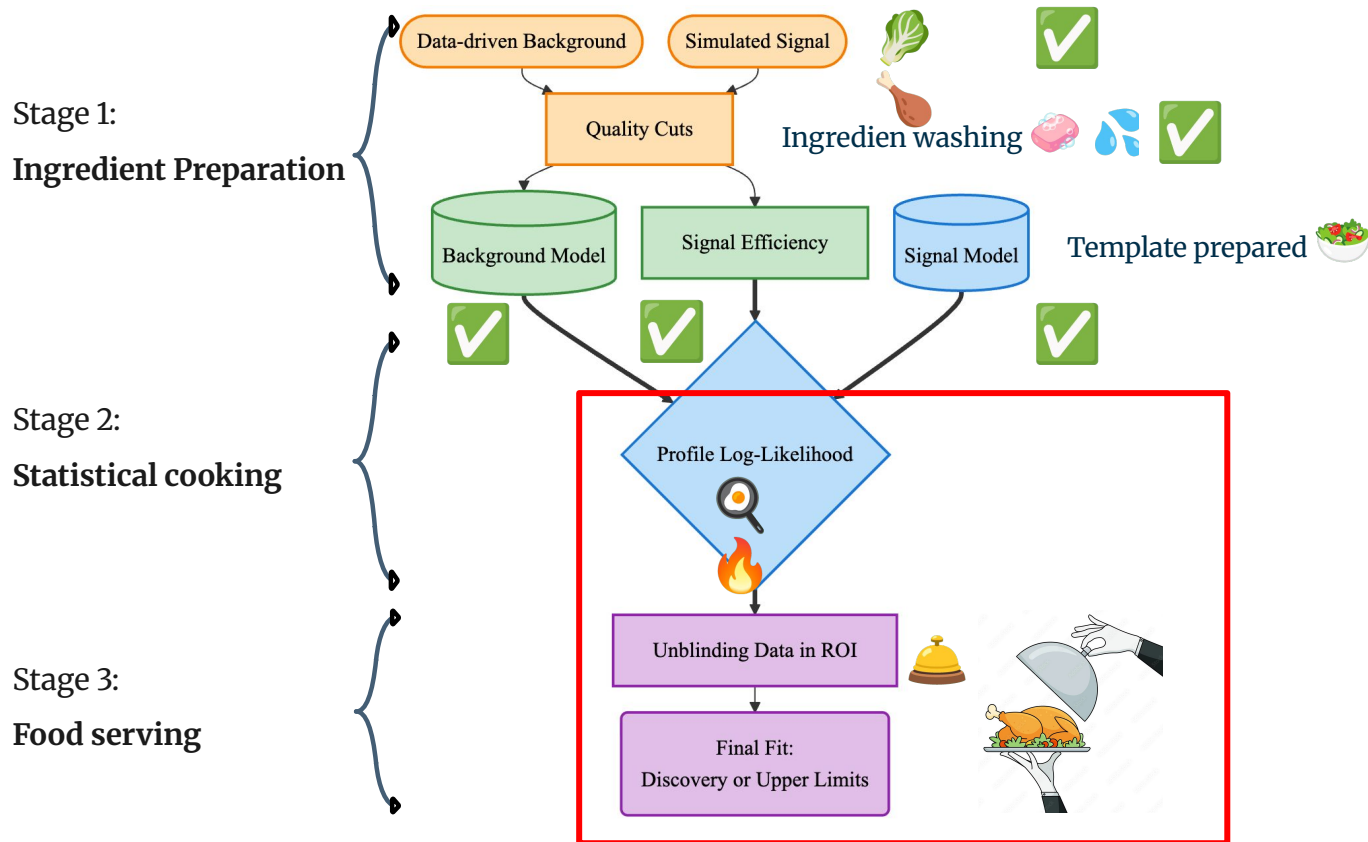
Charge Yield:
 $E_{\text{recoil}} \Rightarrow N_{\text{electrons}}$



Signal Efficiency



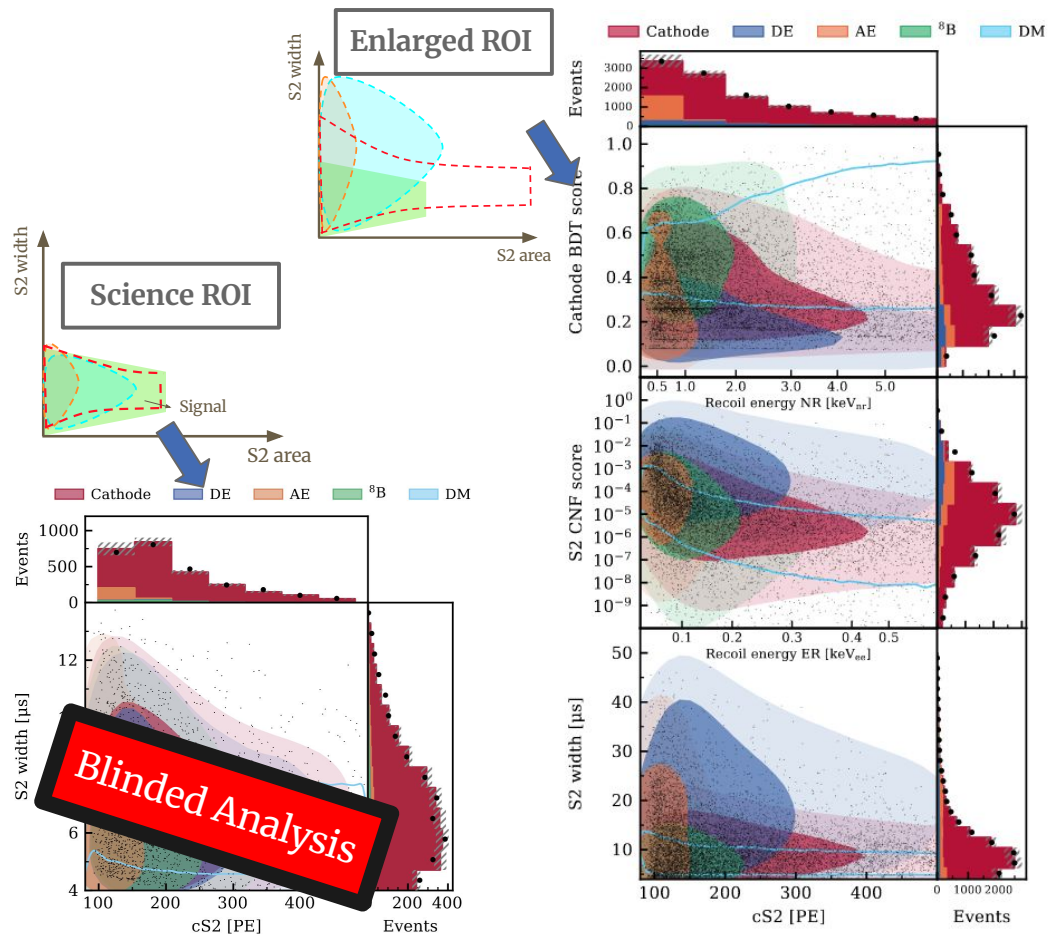
The S2-only recipe



Unblinding

Validation of background model

1. Unblind S2-only data of **7.83 tonne-year** combining SR0, SR1 and SR2
2. **Good agreement** between the observed events and background model
3. First complete S2-only background model, **validated across different dimensions**



Unblinding Events

Science run (exposure)	SR0 (1.50 t · y)		SR1 (2.44 t · y)		SR2 (3.89 t · y)	
Component	Expectation	Best fit	Expectation	Best fit	Expectation	Best fit
Cathode	480 ± 70	477^{+25}_{-24}	660 ± 70	726^{+28}_{-27}	1210 ± 90	1080 ± 30
Delayed electron	1.3 ± 0.5	1.3 ± 0.5	0.34 ± 0.07	0.34 ± 0.07	17.2 ± 2.3	17.1 ± 2.3
Accidental electron	97 ± 17	89 ± 13	108 ± 8	106 ± 8	—	—
^8B CE ν NS	21 ± 5	18^{+5}_{-4}	29 ± 7	26^{+7}_{-6}	32.3 ± 8	29^{+8}_{-6}
Total background	600 ± 80	586 ± 28	800 ± 80	858^{+30}_{-29}	1260 ± 100	1130 ± 30
Observed	583		864		1107	

Good agreement
 $\Rightarrow$ **No signal excess**

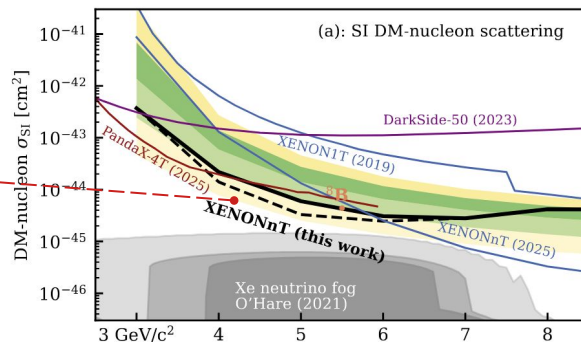
Limits on light DM (NR channel)



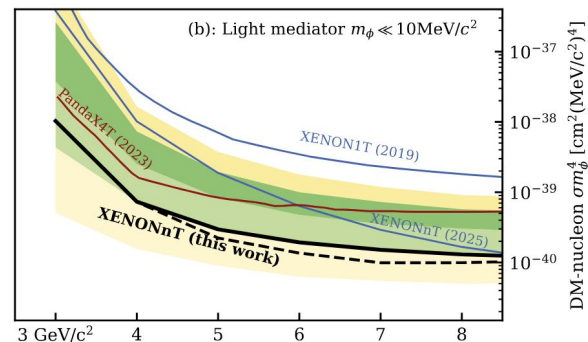
XENON

- Exclude cross sections above $6.0 \times 10^{-45} \text{ cm}^2$ at $m_\chi = 5 \text{ GeV}/c^2$
- Approaching the neutrino fog
- Downward fluctuations at low DM mass
- PCL (Power-Constrained Limit) applied

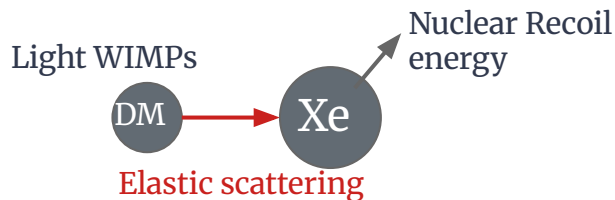
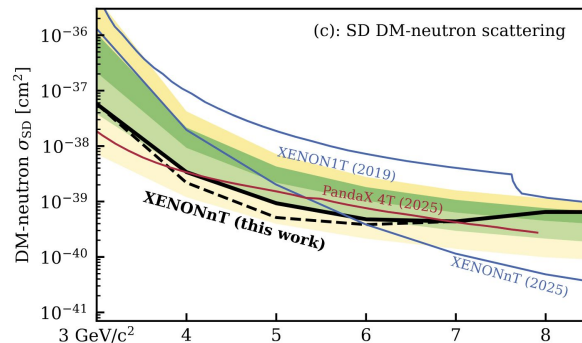
Spin-independent + heavy mediator



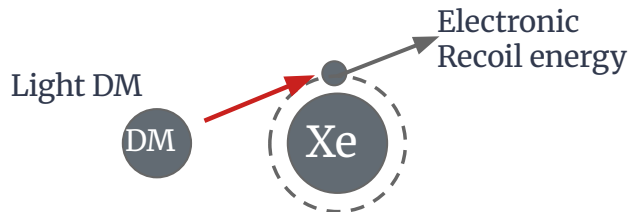
Spin-independent + light mediator



Spin-dependent + heavy mediator

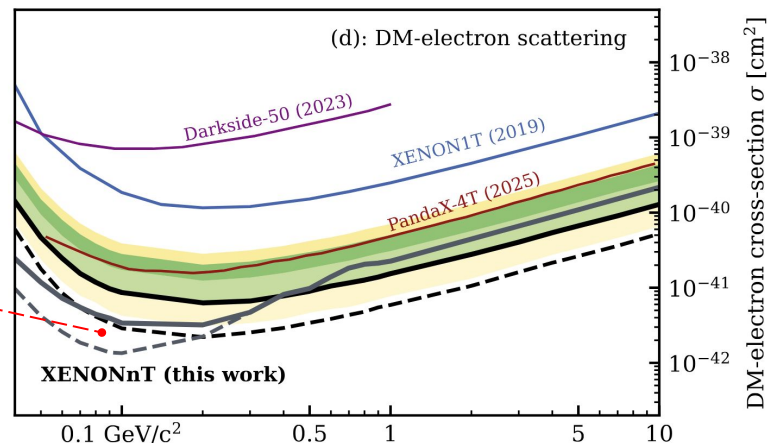


Limits on light DM (ER channel)

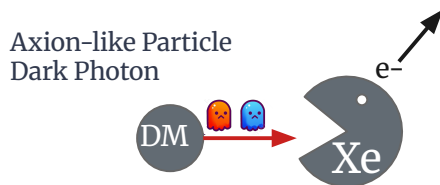


- Excluding DM–electron scattering σ above $6.3 \times 10^{-42} \text{ cm}^2$ at $m_\chi = 0.2 \text{ GeV}/c^2$.
- Two signal models are adopted for comparison with other experiments.

Electronic recoil + heavy mediator

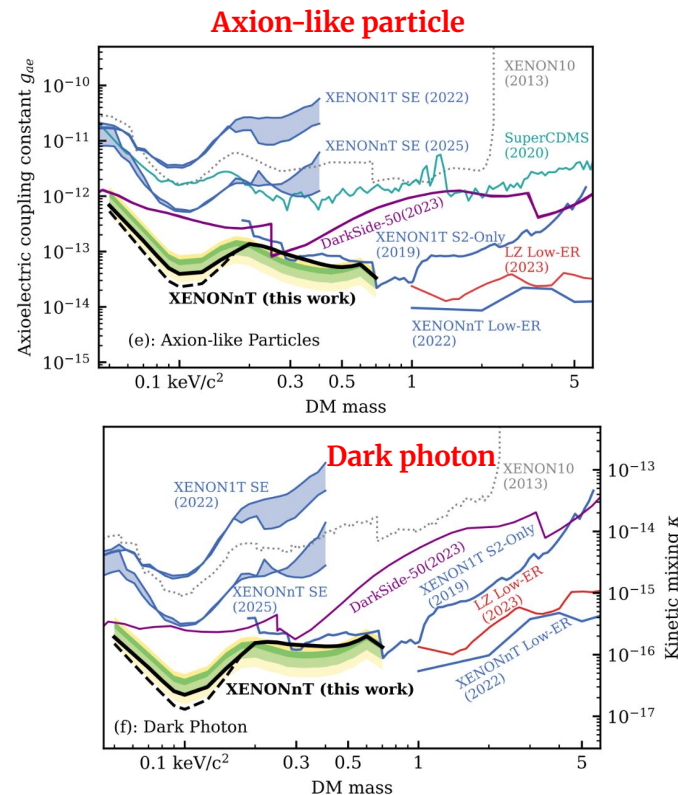


Limits on light DM (ER channel)



Exclude the parameter spaces for **bosonic DM**:

- Axion-like particles (axioelectric coupling constant)
 - $g_{ae} = 3.9 \times 10^{-14} @ m_X = 0.1 \text{ keV}/c^2$
- Dark photon (kinetic mixing constant)
 - $\kappa = 2.2 \times 10^{-17} @ m_X = 0.1 \text{ keV}/c^2$



Summary



This four-year PhD research was conducted within the XENON collaboration, with the funding support from the China Scholarship Council (CSC):

1. Technical Contributions: **Deepened the understanding of ionization signals (S2).**

- Characterized electron drift, diffusion, and local field distortions.
- Developed S2 pulse shape models and the data selections based on simulation and ML.
- Benefited not only the S2-only search but also improved the standard S1+S2 analysis.

2. Main Analysis: **Contributed to the comprehensive S2-only framework for Light Dark Matter.**

- Overcame the loss of S1 by developing waveform, topological, and ML-based background suppression strategies.
- Constructed the **first complete, multi-dimensional background model** (Cathode, DE, AE) for S2-only searches.
- Achieved world-leading sensitivities for multiple Light Dark Matter candidates using an 7.8 tonne-year exposure.
- Accepted by *PRL*, *arxiv*: 2601.11296: Responsible of this analysis, member of writing team, corresponding author.

Outlook

1. **Pushing the energy threshold:** Extend the current analysis methods to the fewer-electron regimes to construct a more comprehensive background model.
2. **Refining background models:** Address cathode background through hardware improvements and advanced software techniques (simulation-driven cross-modeling) to lower prediction uncertainties.

THANK YOU for being part of
my PhD journey!!!



XENON & Xelab team @LPNHE



Queen of fève @group meetings



Fei's group @Tsinghua



XENON collabration & S2-only Group

Special thanks to my supervisors, the committee, the funding...

Thank you for your attention !