Suppression of High-$p_T$ Neutral Pion Production in Central Pb+Pb Collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 17.3$ GeV Relative to p+C and p+Pb Collisions

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Neutral pion transverse momentum spectra were measured in p+C and p+Pb collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 17.4$ GeV at mid-rapidity ($2.3 < \eta_{lab} < 3.0$) over the range $0.7 < p_T < 3.5$ GeV/c. The spectra are compared to $\pi^0$ spectra measured in Pb+Pb collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 17.3$ GeV in the same experiment. For a wide range of Pb+Pb centralities ($N_{part} < 300$) the yield of $\pi^0$'s with $p_T < 2$ GeV/c is larger than or consistent with the p+C or p+Pb yields scaled with the number of nucleon-nucleon collisions ($N_{coll}$), while for central Pb+Pb collisions with $N_{part} > 350$ the $\pi^0$ yield is suppressed.

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The study of hadron production at high transverse momentum ($p_T$) is a sensitive tool to characterize the matter created in ultrarelativistic heavy-ion collisions, and in particular, to detect the possible formation of a quark-gluon plasma (QGP), i.e., a thermalized phase in which quarks and gluons are the relevant degrees of free-
dom. Particles at high $p_T$ result from quark and gluon scatterings with high momentum transfer (“hard scattering”) which can be described by perturbative quantumchromodynamics (pQCD). The scattered quarks and gluons will traverse the created medium and fragment into the observable hadrons. High-$p_T$ particle production in nucleus-nucleus (A+A) collisions was predicted to be reduced because of the energy loss of the scattered partons in the dense matter (“jet quenching”). Such suppression was observed by experiments at the Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider (RHIC) in central Au+Au and Cu+Cu collisions at a center-of-mass energy of up to $\sqrt{s_{NN}}=200$ GeV [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Within jet-quenching models the suppression can be related to medium properties, such as the initial gluon density or the transport coefficient [7, 8, 9].

A crucial test for the idea of parton energy loss in the hot and dense medium created in A+A collisions is the measurement of the hot and dense medium created in A+A collisions is the transport coefficient [7, 8, 9].

In the WA98 experiment $\pi^0$ yields were measured by detection of photons from the $\pi^0 \rightarrow \gamma\gamma$ decay branch with a highly-segmented lead-glass calorimeter. This detector was located 21.5 m downstream from the target and subtended the pseudorapidity range $2.3 \lesssim \eta_{lab} \lesssim 3.0$. A 400 GeV/c proton beam from the CERN SPS impinged on a beryllium production target to provide a secondary beam selected to have momentum of 160 GeV/c. The secondary beam consisted primarily of protons and pions with roughly equal content. Particles were identified with use of two gas Cherenkov counters located upstream of the 1879 mg/cm$^2$ $^{12}$C (495 mg/cm$^2$ $^{208}$Pb) target. The WA98 minimum bias trigger condition required a minimum amount of transverse energy ($E_T$) in the region $3.5 \lesssim \eta_{lab} \lesssim 5.5$, measured with a sampling calorimeter with electromagnetic and hadronic sections. The measured minimum bias cross section $\sigma_{arb}$ for p+C (p+Pb) of 193 mb (1422 mb) corresponds to 86 % (81 %) of the total geometric cross section. The number of analyzed minimum bias events was $1.2 \cdot 10^6$ (1.0 $\cdot 10^6$) for p+C (p+Pb). A high-energy photon (HEP) trigger based on the sum energy signal of overlapping 4 $\times$ 4 groups of towers in the lead-glass calorimeter was used to enhance the sample of high $p_T$ events. The efficiency of the HEP trigger reached $\sim 100$ % for photons with $p_T \gtrsim 0.8$ GeV/c. An additional $1.5 \cdot 10^6$ (0.5 $\cdot 10^6$) p+C (p+Pb) HEP events were analyzed which corresponded to $3.9 \cdot 10^7$ (8.2 $\cdot 10^6$) sampled minimum bias events.

Neutral pion yields were determined statistically by counting photon pairs with invariant mass in the $\pi^0$ mass range after subtraction of the background from uncorrelated pairs. The shape of this background was determined by mixing photons from different events. Only photon pairs with an energy asymmetry $\alpha = |E_1 - E_2|/(E_1 + E_2) < 0.7$ were used in the analysis. A correction for geometrical acceptance and reconstruction efficiency was applied to the raw $\pi^0$ yields. The reconstruction efficiency takes into account the loss of $\pi^0$'s due to the photon identification and energy asymmetry cuts. It also modifies the $\pi^0$ yield to account for the $p_T$ shift that results from the finite energy resolution of the lead-glass calorimeter convoluted with the steeply falling $\pi^0 p_T$ spectrum. Effects of overlapping showers in the calorimeter, which were important in central Pb+Pb collisions, are negligible in p+C and p+Pb collisions. The dominant systematic uncertainties are listed in Table II. The systematic uncertainties of the peak extraction, acceptance correction, and efficiency correction are approximately independent of $p_T$. The energy scale of the calorimeter was confirmed by comparison of the measured $p_T$-dependent $\pi^0$ peak positions with GEANT simulations. The estimated uncertainty of 1.5 % on the energy scale leads to an uncertainty on the $\pi^0$ yields that increases with $p_T$.

The spectra of the invariant $\pi^0$ yields in p+C and p+Pb collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}}=17.4$ GeV are shown in Fig. I.
demonstrate that pQCD calculations cannot be used as
that threshold resummation corrections must be taken
turbative expansion is not sufficient at low energies and
choice of scale. It has been suggested that the NLO per-
portion shows a large uncertainty related to the arbitrary
calculations have been scaled by the average number of
was performed with the CTEQ6M [22] parton distribu-
compared to a next-to-leading-order (NLO) pQCD cal-

The transition between the minimum bias and the HEP
sample occurs at $p_T = 1.7 \text{ GeV/c}$. The p+C spectrum is
compared to a next-to-leading-order (NLO) pQCD cal-
culation for p+p at the same energy $^{21}$. The calculation
was performed with the CTEQ6M parton distribution functions and the “Kniehl-Kramer-Pötter” (KKP)
set of fragmentation functions $^{23}$ with renormalization
and factorization scales set to be the same at $\mu = p_T/2$, $p_T$, or $2p_T$. For comparison with the p+C data the pQCD
calculations have been scaled by the average number of
nucleon-nucleon collisions in p+C. The pQCD calculation
shows a large uncertainty related to the arbitrary choice of scale. It has been suggested that the NLO per-
turbative expansion is not sufficient at low energies and
that threshold resummation corrections must be taken
into account $^{21}$. The large theoretical uncertainties
demonstrate that pQCD calculations cannot be used as
a reliable reference at CERN SPS energies. The inset
of Fig. 1 shows that the $\pi^0$ yields per nucleon-nucleon
collision measured in p+C are in good agreement with a
parameterization of $\pi^0$ spectra in p+p from Blattnig et al. $^{20}$ that has been employed to study nuclear effects
in Pb+Pb collisions $^{18}$.

Nuclear effects in $\pi^0$ production can be quantified with the nuclear modification factor defined as

$$R'_{AA} = \frac{\langle N_{\pi^0}^{p+p} \rangle}{\langle N_{\pi^0}^{A+A} \rangle} \frac{dN_{\pi^0}/dp_T}{dN_{\pi^0}/dp_T}^{p+p}$$

In the absence of nuclear effects $R'_{AA}$ is expected to be unity for $p_T \gtrsim 2 \text{ GeV/c}$ where hard scattering is expected to dominate particle production. $\langle N_{\text{coll}} \rangle$ was determined with a Glauber Monte Carlo calculation $^{24}$ using an inelastic nucleon-nucleon cross section of $\sigma_{\text{inel}} = (31.8 \pm 2) \text{ mb}$ $^{24}$. The same Glauber calculation was used to extract $\langle N_{\text{coll}} \rangle$ values in Pb+Pb collisions. In the Glauber calculation the transverse energy $E_T$ was modelled by sampling a negative binomial distribution to determine the $E_T$ contribution of each participating nucleon $^{24}$. The bias due to the trigger selection on the measured $E_T$ was taken into account. For minimum bias p+C and p+Pb collisions values of $\langle N_{\text{coll}} \rangle_{p+C} = 1.7 \pm 0.2$ and $\langle N_{\text{coll}} \rangle_{p+Pb} = 3.8 \pm 0.4$ were obtained.

The $\langle N_{\text{coll}} \rangle$ values for Pb+Pb collisions were determined by applying cuts to the simulated $E_T$ that corresponded to the same fraction of $\sigma_{\text{mb}}$ as the cuts applied to the measured $E_T$. These $\langle N_{\text{coll}} \rangle$ values are listed in Table I and agree within systematic uncertainties with those of Ref. $^{16}$ that were determined with the VENUS 4.12 event generator in which $\sigma_{\text{inel}}^{NN} = 29.6 \text{ mb}$ was used. With the large acceptance of the WA98 $E_T$ measurement, and good description of the $E_T$ distribution, including fluctuations $^{14}$, a centrality class corresponding to the 1% most central Pb+Pb collisions could be defined to access very large $\langle N_{\text{coll}} \rangle$ values.

The $p+Pb$ $\pi^0$ spectrum appears to be flatter than the p+C spectrum (see Fig. 1). The ratio of the $N_{\text{coll}}$-normalized $p+Pb$ and p+C spectra is shown in Fig. 2. At low $p_T (\sim 1 \text{ GeV/c})$ the ratio is consistent with scaling with the number of participating nucleons ($N_{\text{part}} = |

**TABLE I:** Systematic uncertainties (in %) on the $\pi^0$ yields in p+C and p+Pb collisions at three $p_T$ values.

| $p_T$ (GeV/c) | 1   | 2   | 3   |
|--------------|-----|-----|-----|
| peak extraction | 6   | 6   | 6   |
| geometric acceptance | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| $\pi^0$ reconstruction efficiency | 11  | 11  | 11  |
| energy scale | 5   | 10  | 20  |
| total | 14  | 16  | 24  |

**TABLE II:** Results of the Glauber calculation for Pb+Pb collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 17.3 \text{ GeV}$ ($\sigma_{\text{inel}} = 31.8 \text{ mb}$). Centrality classes are given as a fraction (%) of $\sigma_{\text{mb}}^{pp+Pb} \approx 6300 \text{ mb}$. The systematic uncertainty of $\langle N_{\text{coll}} \rangle$ was parameterized as $\sigma_{\text{coll}}^2 = 0.1^2 + (0.4 \exp(-N_{\text{coll}}/100))^2$.

| class | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   | 8   | 6 - 8 |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|
|       | from | 82.8| 67.0| 48.8| 25.3| 13.0| 6.8 | 1.0 | 0    |
|       | to   | 100 | 82.8| 67.0| 48.8| 25.3| 13.0| 6.8 | 1.0  |
| $\langle N_{\text{coll}} \rangle$ | 6.3 | 22.1| 67.1| 292.9| 433.1| 627.0| 803.7| 912.0| 727.8|

The $p+Pb$ $\pi^0$ spectrum appears to be flatter than the p+C spectrum (see Fig. 1). The ratio of the $N_{\text{coll}}$-normalized p+Pb and p+C spectra is shown in Fig. 2.
The box at unity indicates the stronger nuclear interaction tends to be above unity, consistent with an expected enhancement in p+Pb than in p+C. On the other hand, for the 0–1% most central collisions the π^0 yield is significantly suppressed compared to either p+Pb or p+Pb as a reference. An apparent suppression of the π^0 yield in very central Pb+Pb collisions compared to peripheral collisions was noted in Ref. [16]. However, the large uncertainty of using the peripheral distribution as a reference did not allow to draw a firm conclusion. The observed suppression is qualitatively consistent with expectations from jet-quenching.

The centrality dependence of the average \( R'_{AA} \) for 2 < \( p_T \) < 2.5 GeV/c and 2.5 ≤ \( p_T \) < 3.0 GeV/c is shown in Fig. 4. The π^0 yields in Pb+Pb in these \( p_T \) ranges are not suppressed for \( N_{\text{part}} \lesssim 300 \) (\( \langle R'_{AA} \rangle \gtrsim 1 \)). For more central Pb+Pb collisions \( \langle R'_{AA} \rangle \) decreases with centrality indicating significant suppression of the high \( p_T \) π^0 yield. The apparent lack of suppression, or enhancement even for \( N_{\text{part}} \lesssim 300 \) may be due to competing effects of suppression due to parton energy loss and nuclear \( k_T \)-enhancement.

In summary, \( \pi^0 \) spectra were measured in minimum bias p+C and p+Pb collisions at \( \sqrt{s_{NN}} = 17.4 \) GeV in the range 0.7 < \( p_T \) < 3.5 GeV/c. Based on these spectra the nuclear modification factors \( R'_{AA} \) for Pb+Pb collisions at CERN SPS energies could be determined using a measured p+A reference. In very central Pb+Pb collisions (0–1% of \( \sigma_{\text{mb}}^{\text{Pb+Pb}} \)) a significant suppression of high-\( p_T \) neutral pions was observed (\( R'_{AA} \approx 0.5 \pm 0.14 \)) that is reminiscent of the high-\( p_T \) hadron suppression observed in Cu+Cu and Au+Au collisions at RHIC. The pion suppression reported here, together with the results at higher energies from RHIC, constrain jet-quenching models and may help clarify the behavior of the energy loss of partons in strongly interacting matter.
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