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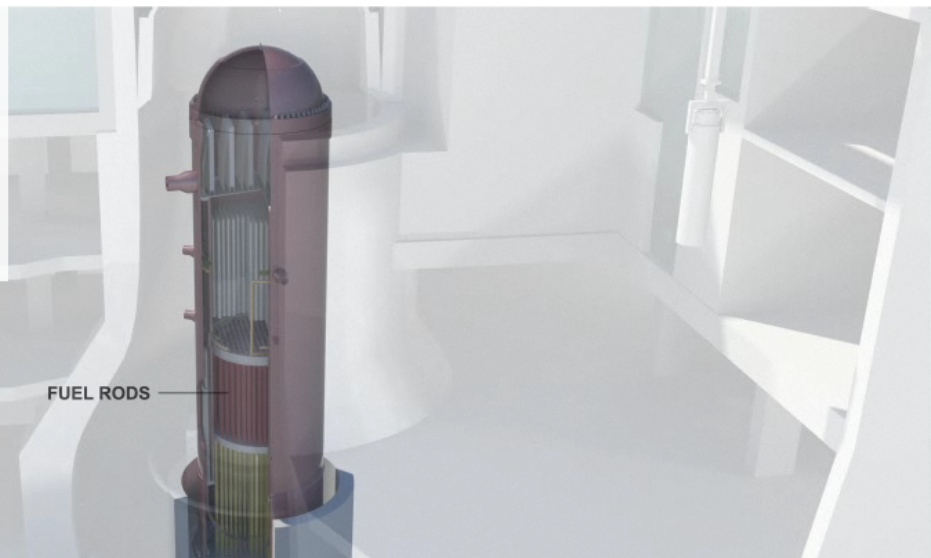
UPDATED March 24, 2011

How a Reactor Shuts Down and What Happens in a Meltdown

The operating reactors at Fukushima Daiichi power station automatically shut down during the earthquake. But after cooling failures, two of them went into partial meltdown.

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If the rods are exposed to air they can heat up quickly. As temperatures spike, the zirconium casings crack, releasing radioactive gases. The increased heat also causes the zirconium to react with the steam, producing hydrogen, which is highly explosive. This is thought to be the cause of explosions that damaged several of the buildings at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant.



By XAQUÍN G.V., BILL MARSH, DYLAN McCLAIN and GRAHAM ROBERTS | [Send Feedback](#)

Sources: Nuclear Energy Institute; David A. Lochbaum, Union of Concerned Scientists; Margaret Harding, 4 Factor Consulting; Arnold Gunderson, Fairwinds Associates; International Atomic Energy Agency

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