

# *Vacuum decay in low-energy collisions of heavy ions*

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# *Outline of the talk*

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- Introduction
- QED at supercritical Coulomb field
- Low-energy heavy-ion collisions
- How to observe the vacuum decay
- Conclusion

## *Introduction: tests of QED with atomic systems*

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**Light atoms** ( $\alpha Z \ll 1$ , weak fields):

Tests of QED to lowest orders in  $\alpha$  and  $\alpha Z$ .

**Heavy few-electron ions** ( $\alpha Z \sim 1$ , strong fields):

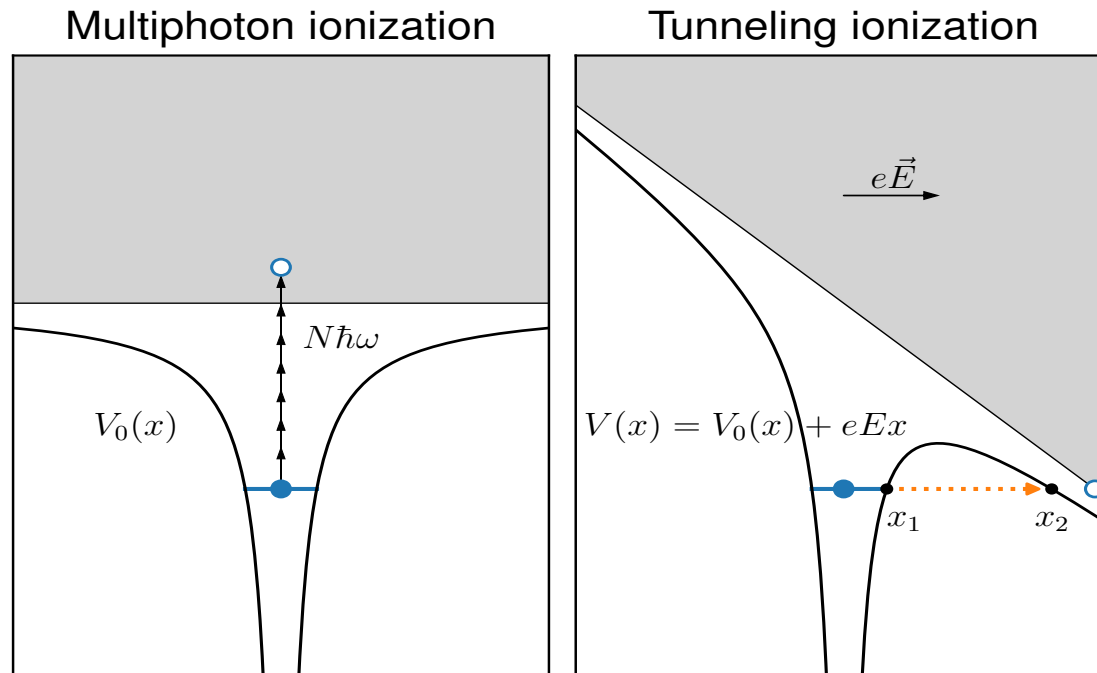
Tests of QED in nonperturbative in  $\alpha Z$  regime.

**Low-energy heavy-ion collisions** at  $Z_1 + Z_2 > 173$  (supercritical fields):

Tests of QED in supercritical regime.

# QED at supercritical fields

## Ionization in quantum mechanics



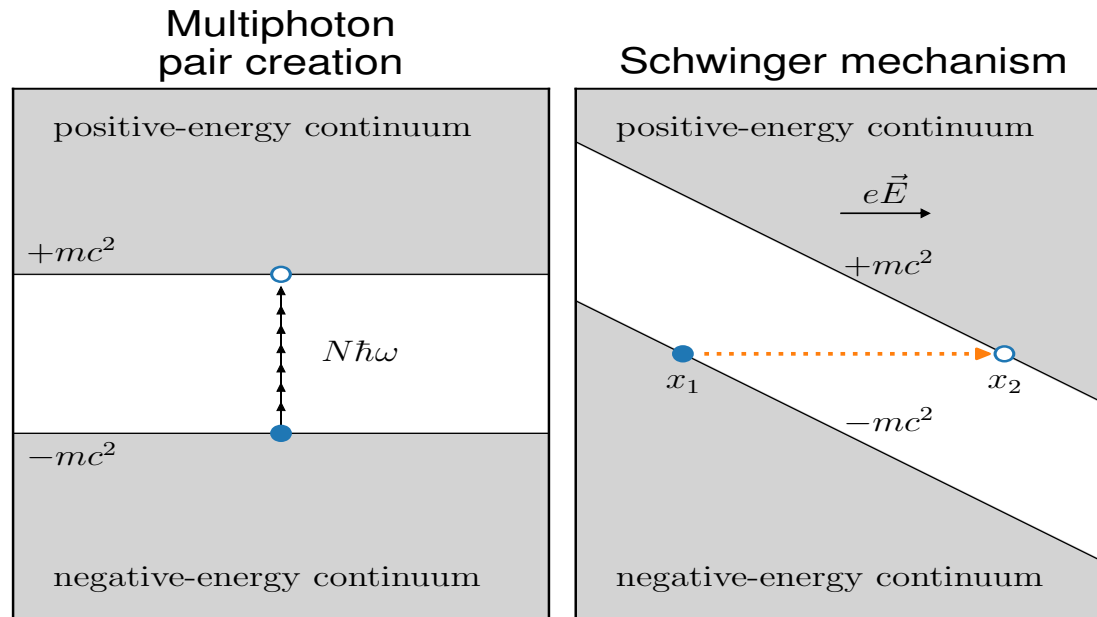
The tunneling probability for a static uniform electric field  $E$ :

$$W \sim \exp\left\{-\frac{4\pi}{\hbar} \int_{x_1}^{x_2} dx \sqrt{2m(V(x) - \mathcal{E})}\right\}$$

where  $V(x) = V_0(x) + eEx$  and  $\mathcal{E}$  is the electron energy.

# QED at supercritical fields

## Electron-positron pair creation



The rate of pair production for a static uniform electric field  $E$ :

$$\frac{d^4 n_{e^+e^-}}{d^3 x dt} \sim \frac{c}{4\pi^3 \lambda_C^4} \exp\left(-\pi \frac{E_c}{E}\right)$$

where  $\lambda_C = \hbar/(mc)$  and  $E_c = m^2 c^3 / (e\hbar) \approx 1.3 \times 10^{16} \text{ V/cm}$ .

## *QED at supercritical fields*

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### **Electron-positron pair creation by a static electric field**

The Schwinger effect has never been observed experimentally as the required field strength,  $E_c \approx 1.3 \times 10^{16} \text{V/cm}$ , is extremely large. The recent developments of the laser technologies have triggered a great interest to theoretical calculations of this effect for various scenarios [*A. Di Piazza, C. Müller, K.Z. Hatsagortsyan, and C.H. Keitel, RMP, 2012*].

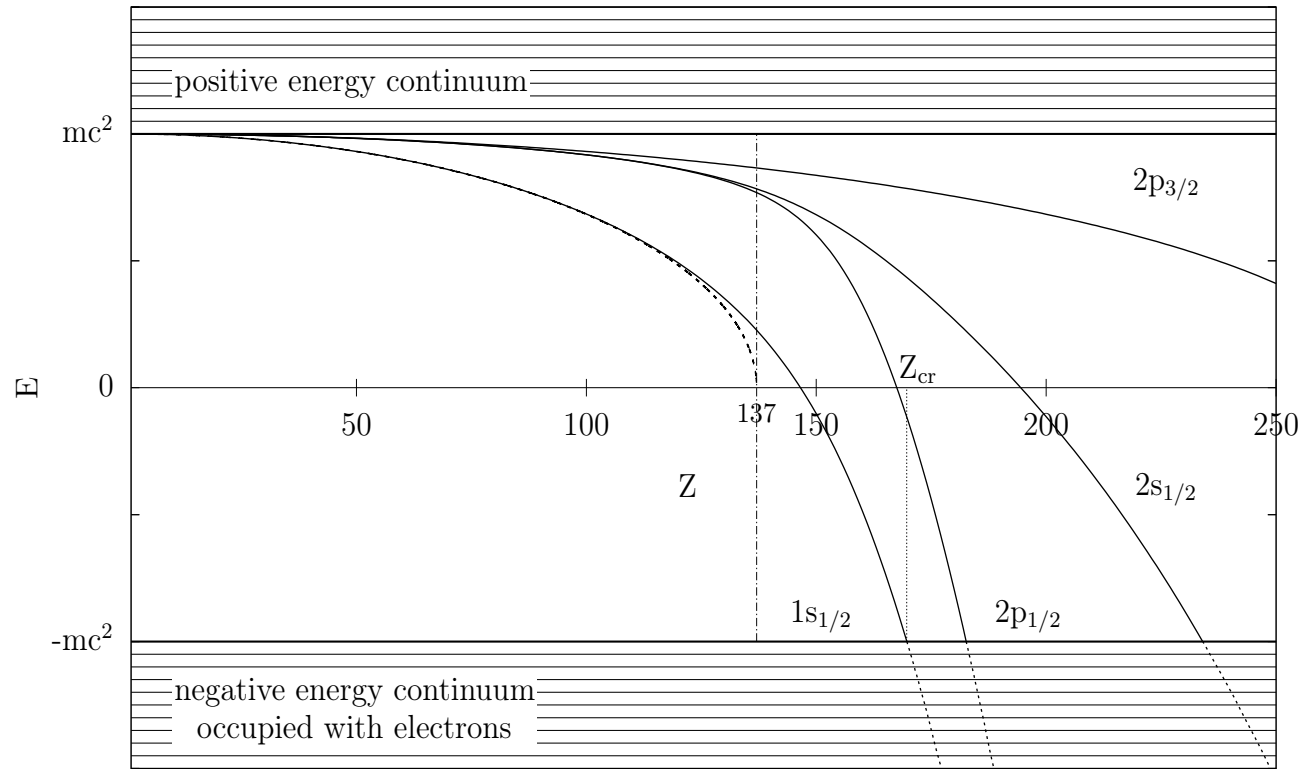
The scenario with two counter-propagating laser pulses is considered as one of most favorable. For the recent progress on the calculations for this scenario we refer to [*I.A. Aleksandrov, G. Plunien, and V.M. Shabaev, PRD, 2018*].

However, even in the most promising scenarios the electric field strength reached with new laser technologies in the not too distant future is expected to be two orders of magnitude smaller than the critical value.

# QED at supercritical Coulomb field

## Supercritical Coulomb field

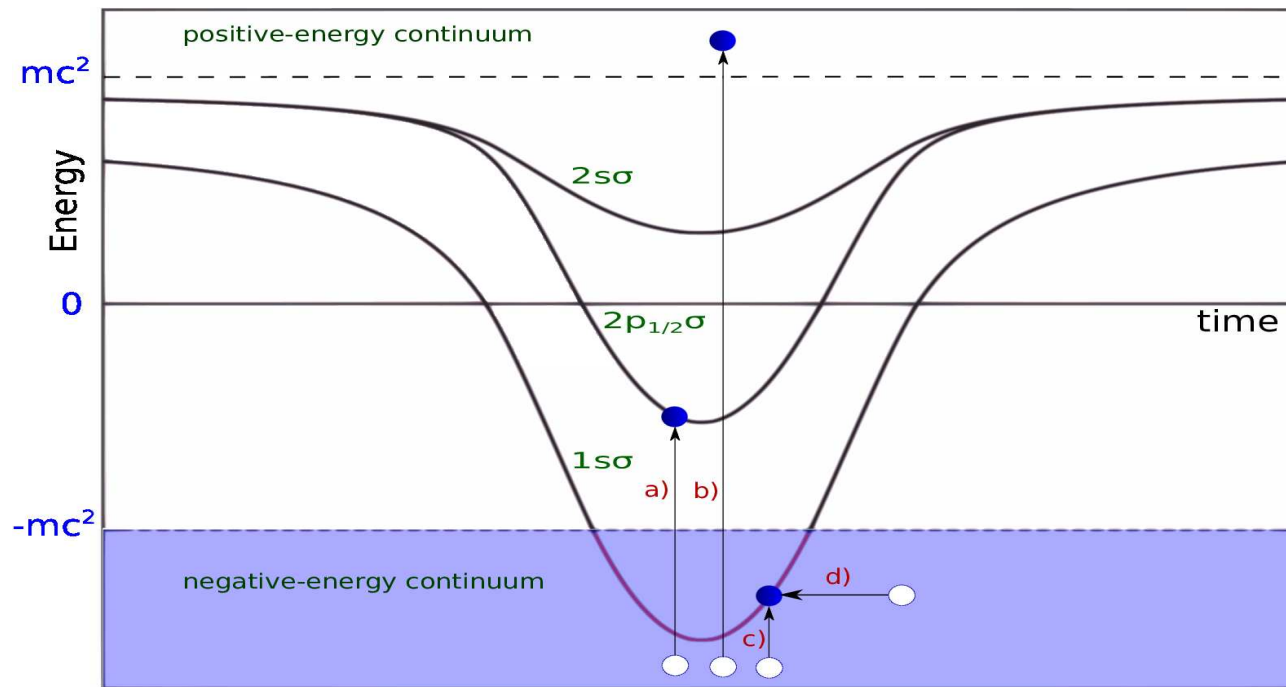
S.S. Gershtein, Ya.B. Zel'dovich, 1969; W. Pieper, W. Greiner, 1969



The  $1s$  level dives into the negative-energy continuum at  $Z_{crit} \approx 173$ .

## Low-energy heavy-ion collisions

Creation of electron-positron pairs in low-energy heavy-ion collisions, with  $Z_1 + Z_2 > 173$



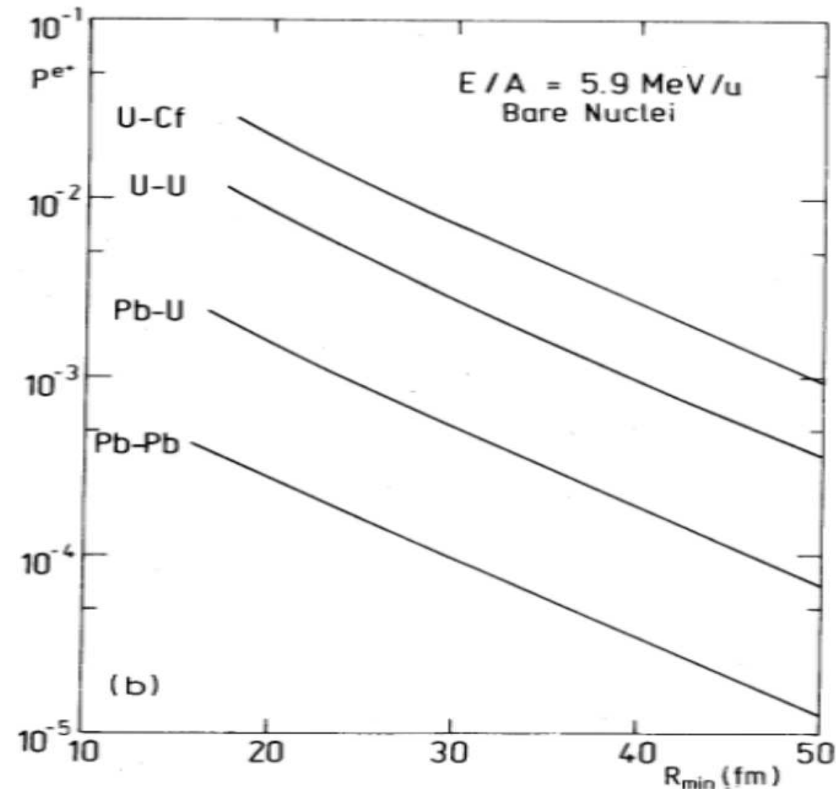
Dynamical mechanism: a), b), c). Spontaneous mechanism (vacuum decay): d). The  $1s$  state dives into the negative-energy continuum for about  $10^{-21}$  sec.



## Low-energy heavy-ion collisions

Positron production probability in 5.9 MeV/u collisions of bare nuclei as a function of distance of closest approach  $R_{\min}$

(J. Reinhardt, B. Müller, and W. Greiner, *Phys. Rev. A*, 1981).



Conclusion by Frankfurt's group (2005): The vacuum decay could only be observed in collisions with nuclear sticking, in which the nuclei are bound to each other for some period of time by nuclear forces.

## *Low-energy heavy-ion collisions*

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New methods for calculations of quantum dynamics of electron-positron field in low-energy heavy-ion collisions at subcritical and supercritical regimes have been developed:

- *I.I. Tupitsyn, Y.S. Kozhedub, V.M. Shabaev et al., Phys. Rev. A 82, 042701 (2010).*
- *I. I. Tupitsyn, Y. S. Kozhedub, V. M. Shabaev et al., Phys. Rev. A 85, 032712 (2012).*
- *G. B. Deyneka, I. A. Maltsev, I. I. Tupitsyn et al., Russ. J. of Phys. Chem. B 6, 224 (2012).*
- *G. B. Deyneka, I. A. Maltsev, I. I. Tupitsyn et al., Eur. Phys. J. D 67, 258 (2013).*
- *Y.S. Kozhedub, V.M. Shabaev, I.I. Tupitsyn et al., Phys. Rev. A 90, 042709 (2014).*
- *I.A. Maltsev, V.M. Shabaev, I.I. Tupitsyn et al., NIMB, 408, 97 (2017).*
- *R.V. Popov, A.I. Bondarev, Y.S. Kozhedub et al., Eur. Phys. J. D 72, 115 (2018).*
- *I.A. Maltsev, V.M. Shabaev, R.V. Popov et al., Phys. Rev. A 98, 062709 (2018).*

# Low-energy heavy-ion collisions

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## Time-dependent Dirac equation

$$i \frac{\partial}{\partial t} \psi(\mathbf{r}, t) = (\boldsymbol{\alpha} \cdot \mathbf{p} + \beta m_e + V(\mathbf{r}, t)) \psi(\mathbf{r}, t)$$

with

$$V(\mathbf{r}, t) = V_A(|\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{R}_A(t)|) + V_B(|\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{R}_B(t)|).$$

We introduce two sets of the solutions (*see, e.g., papers by D. Gitman et al.*):

$$\psi_i^{(+)}(\mathbf{r}, t_{\text{in}}) = \phi_i^{\text{in}}(\mathbf{r}), \quad \psi_i^{(-)}(\mathbf{r}, t_{\text{out}}) = \phi_i^{\text{out}}(\mathbf{r}),$$

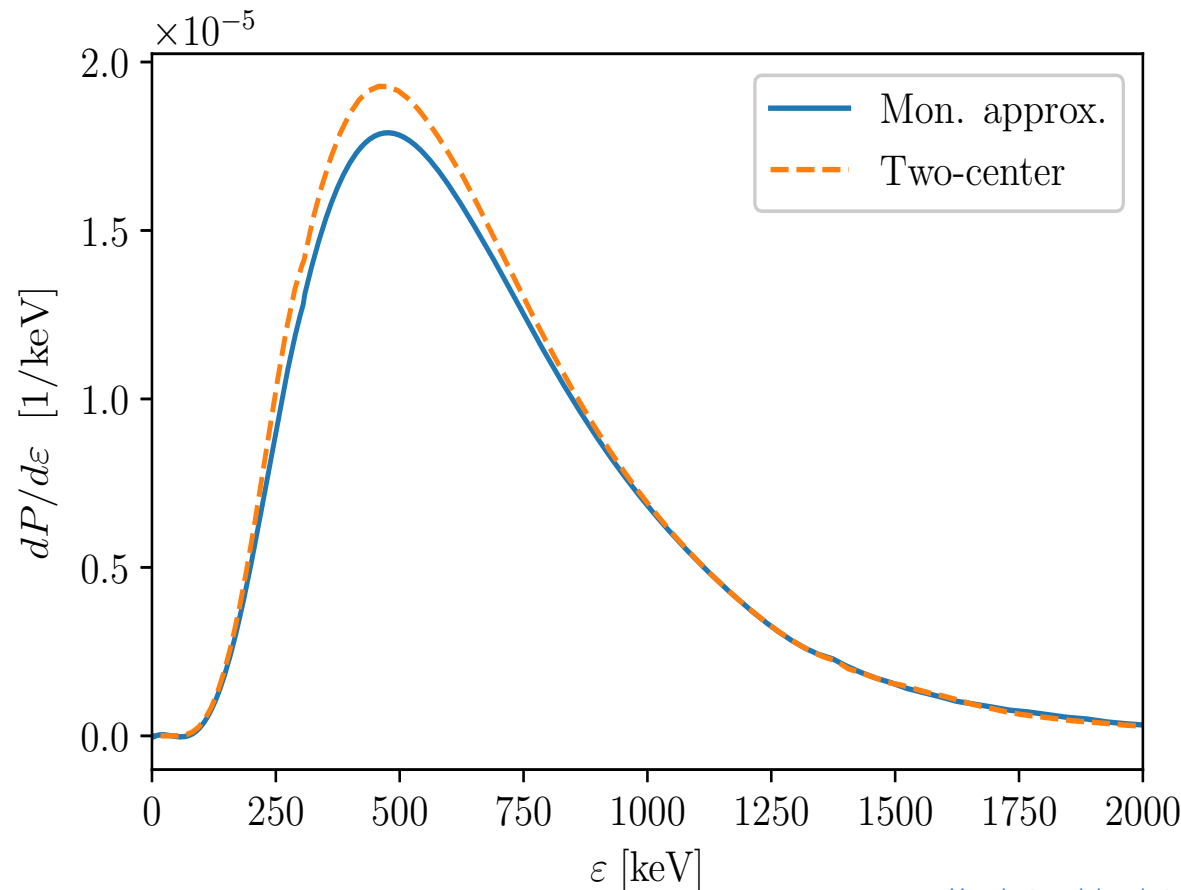
where  $\phi_i^{\text{in}}(\mathbf{r})$  and  $\phi_i^{\text{out}}(\mathbf{r})$  are the eigenfunctions of the Dirac Hamiltonian at the corresponding time moments. The number of created positrons in a state “p” is given by

$$\bar{n}_p = \sum_{i>F} \left| \int d\mathbf{r} \psi_p^{(-)\dagger}(\mathbf{r}, t) \psi_i^{(+)}(\mathbf{r}, t) \right|^2.$$

# Low-energy heavy-ion collisions

## Pair creation beyond the monopole approximation

Positron energy spectrum for the U–U head-on collision at energy  $E_{\text{cm}} = 740 \text{ MeV}$  (I.A. Maltsev, V.M. Shabaev, R.V. Popov et al., *PRA*, 2018; R.V. Popov, V.M. Shabaev, I.A. Maltsev et al., *arXiv:2303.16288*)



## Low-energy heavy-ion collisions

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### Pair creation beyond the monopole approximation

$$\text{U-U, } E_{\text{cm}} = 740 \text{ MeV}$$

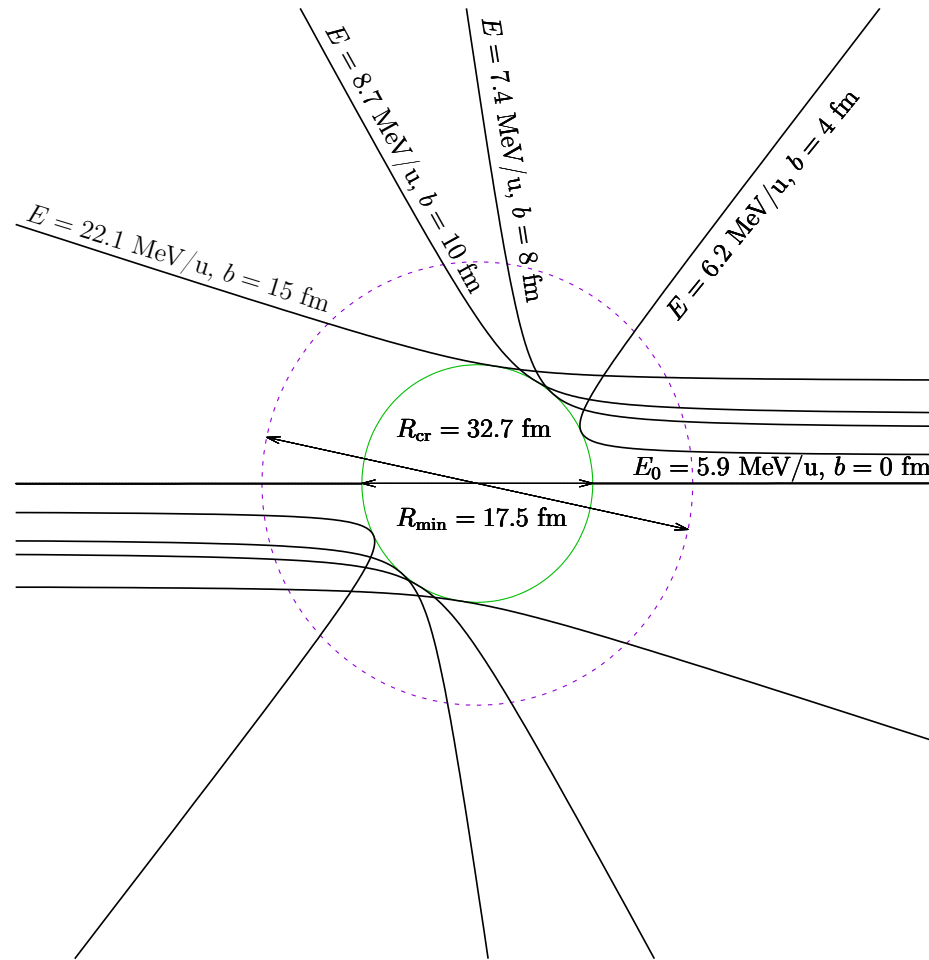
Expected number of created pairs as a function of the impact parameter  $b$

*(I.A. Maltsev, V.M. Shabaev, R.V. Popov et al., PRA, 2018;  
R.V. Popov, V.M. Shabaev, I.A. Maltsev et al., arXiv:2303.16288)*

$b$ (fm)	Monopole approximation	Two-center approach
0	$1.29 \times 10^{-2}$	$1.35 \times 10^{-2}$
10	$7.26 \times 10^{-3}$	$7.78 \times 10^{-3}$
20	$2.75 \times 10^{-3}$	$3.09 \times 10^{-3}$
30	$1.04 \times 10^{-3}$	$1.22 \times 10^{-3}$

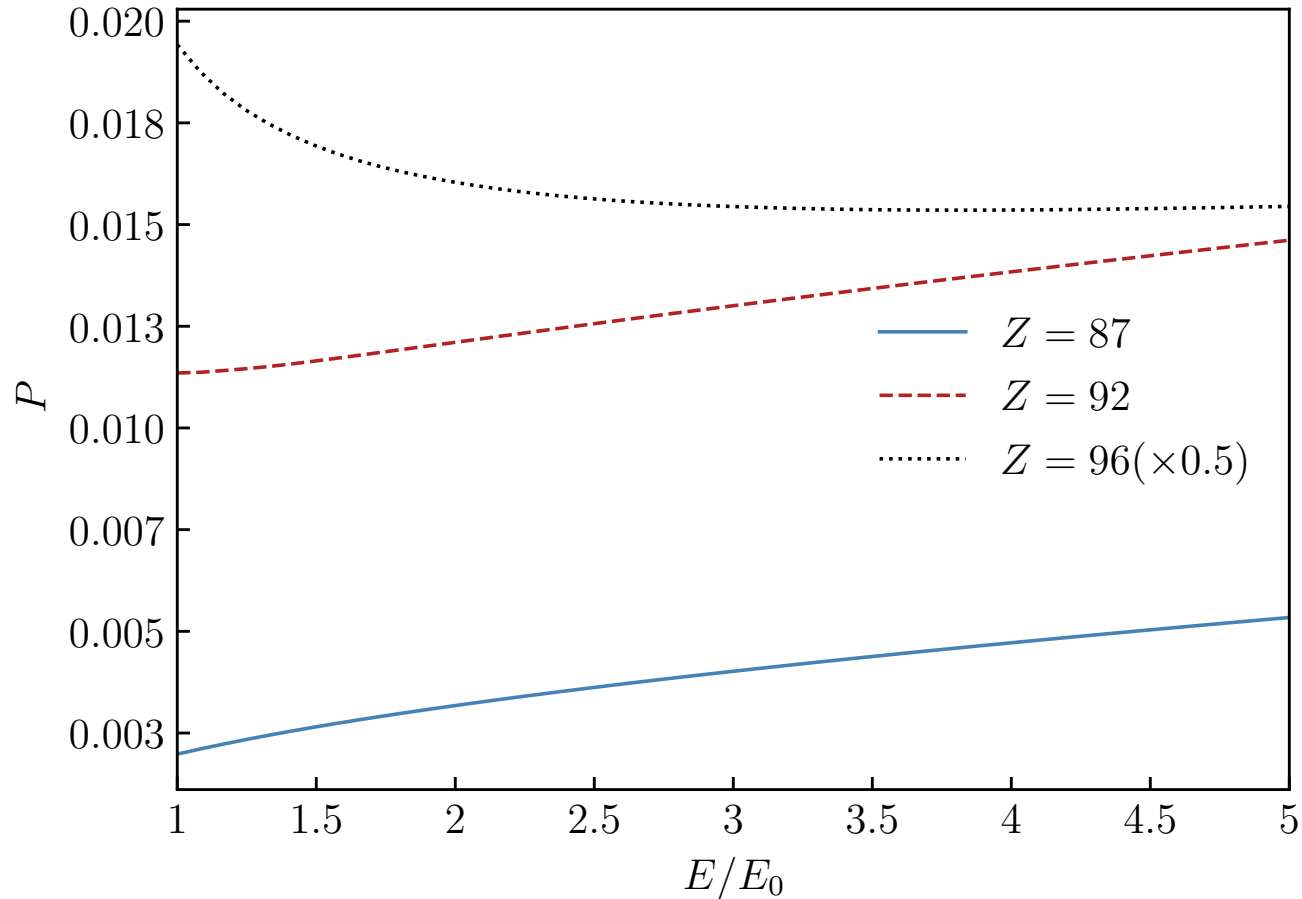
# How to observe the vacuum decay

(I.A. Maltsev et al., PRL, 2019; R.V. Popov et al., PRD, 2020)



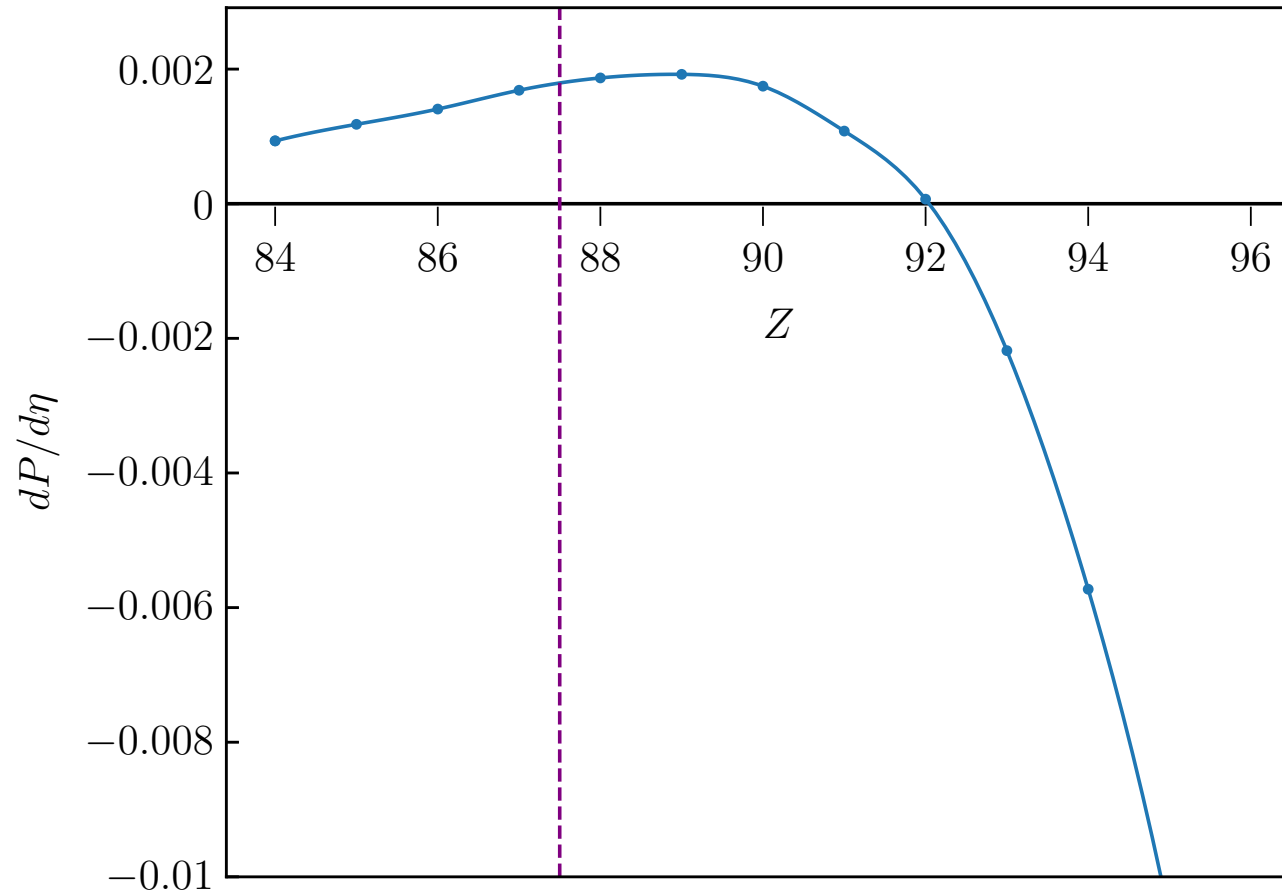
We consider only the trajectories for which the minimal internuclear distance is the same:  $R_{min} = 17.5$  fm. We introduce  $\eta = E/E_0 \geq 1$ .

## How to observe the vacuum decay



Total pair-production probability for symmetric ( $Z = Z_1 = Z_2$ ) collisions as a function of the collision energy at  $R_{\min} = 17.5$  fm.

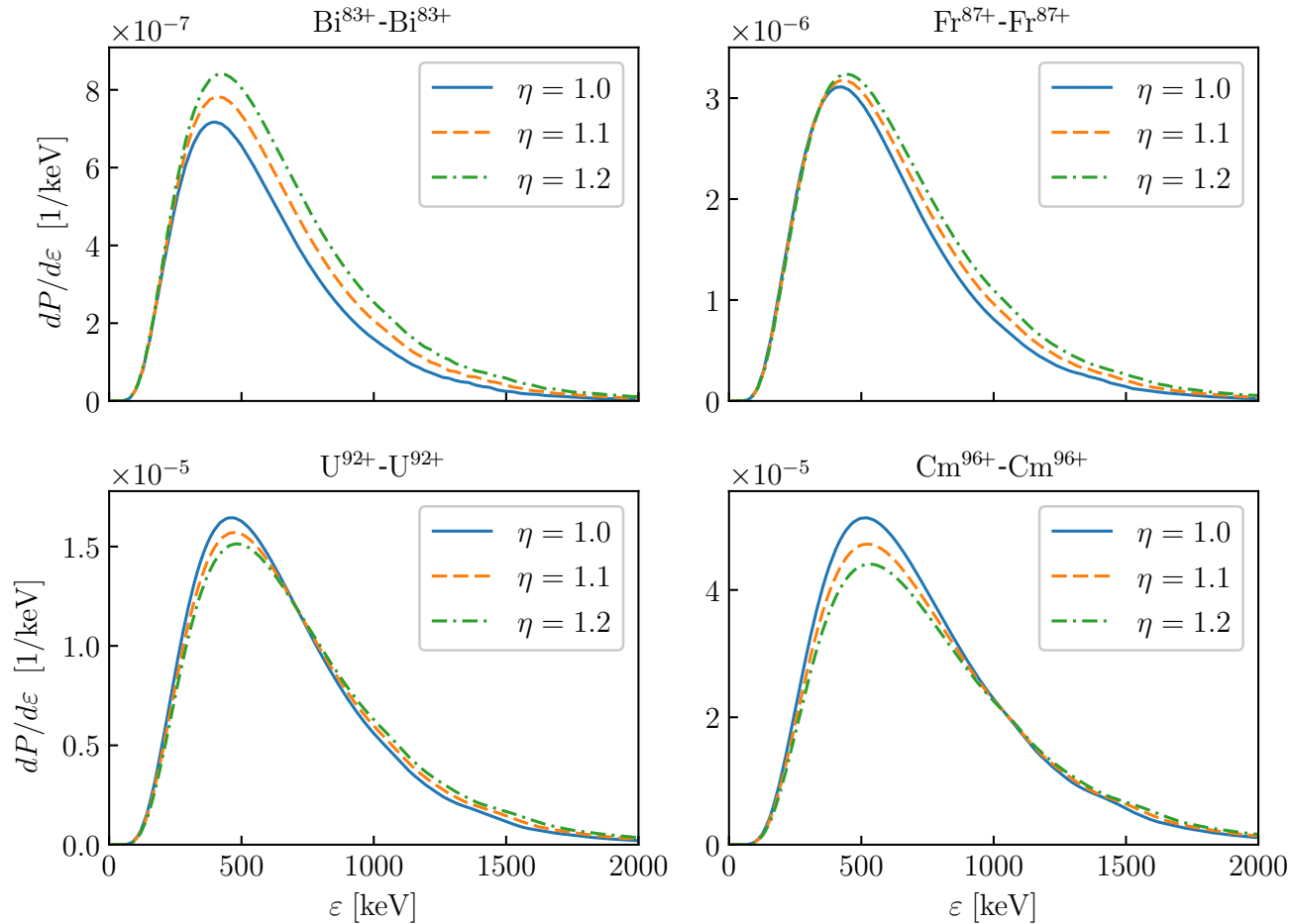
## How to observe the vacuum decay



The derivative of the pair-production probability with respect to the energy  $dP/d\eta$ , where  $\eta = E/E_0$ , at the point  $\eta = 1$  as a function of the nuclear charge number  $Z = Z_1 = Z_2$  at  $R_{\min} = 17.5$  fm.



# How to observe the vacuum decay

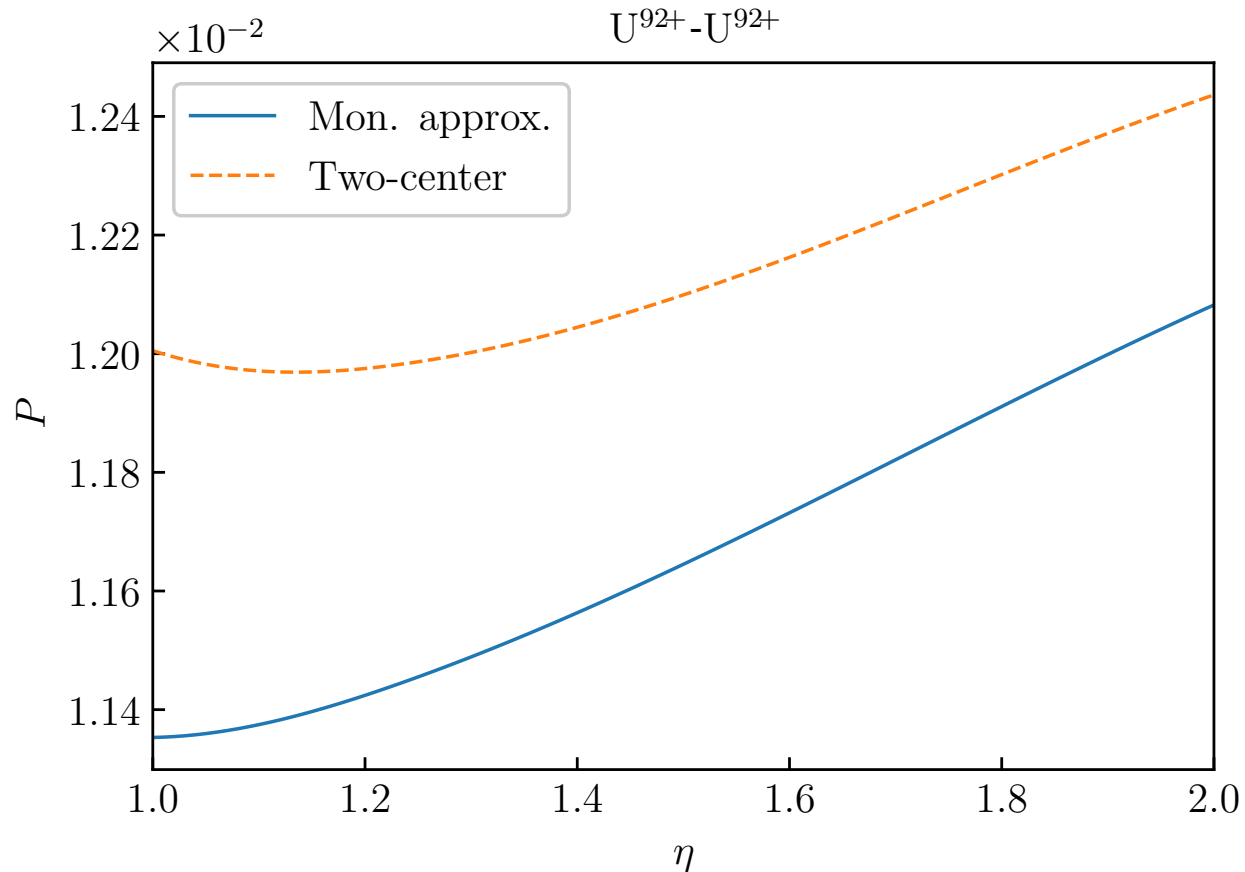


Positron spectra in symmetric ( $Z = Z_1 = Z_2$ ) collisions for different collision energy  $\eta = E/E_0$  at  $R_{\min} = 17.5$  fm.

# How to observe the vacuum decay

## Calculations beyond the monopole approximation

(R.V. Popov, V.M. Shabaev, I.A. Maltsev et al., arXiv:2303.16288)

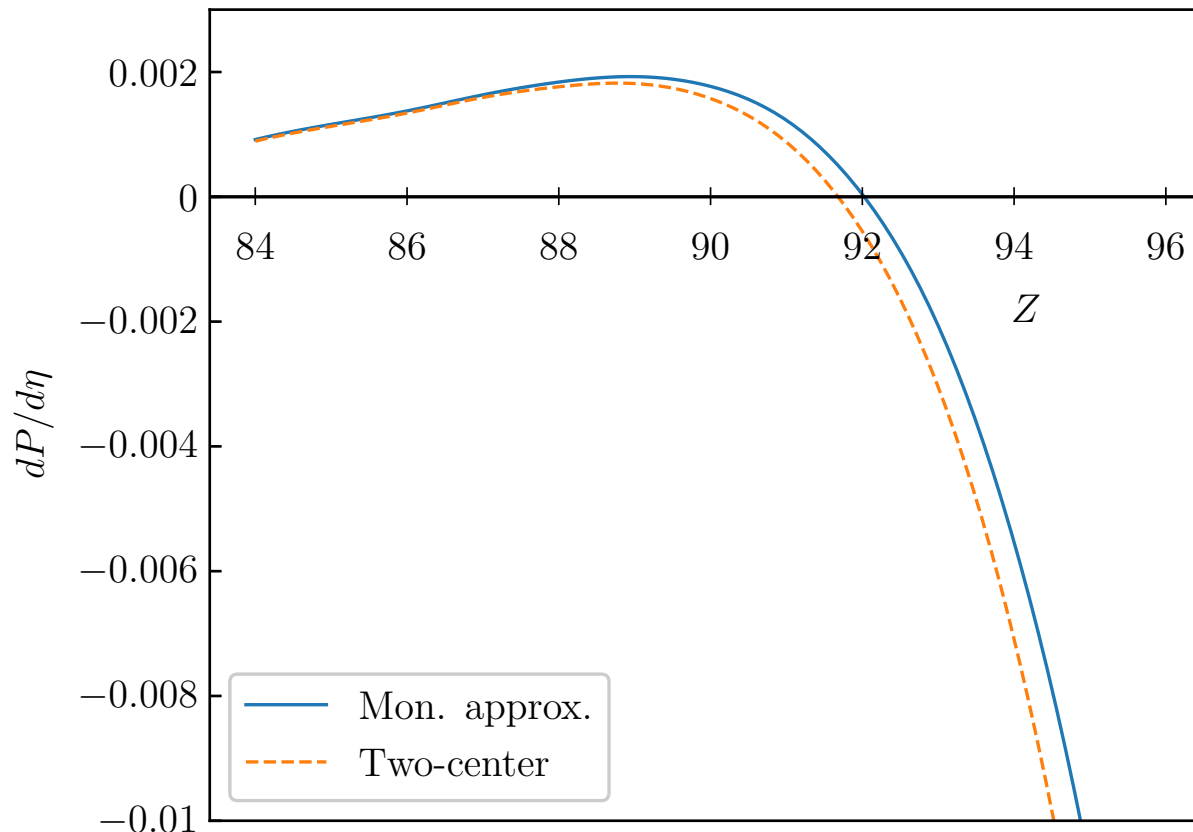


Total pair-production probability for symmetric ( $Z = Z_1 = Z_2$ ) collisions as a function of the collision energy at  $R_{\min} = 17.5$  fm.

# How to observe the vacuum decay

## Calculations beyond the monopole approximation

(R.V. Popov, V.M. Shabaev, I.A. Maltsev et al., arXiv:2303.16288)



The derivative of the pair-production probability with respect to the energy  $dP/d\eta$ , where  $\eta = E/E_0$ , at the point  $\eta = 1$  as a function of the nuclear charge number  $Z = Z_1 = Z_2$  at  $R_{\min} = 17.5$  fm.

## *How to observe the vacuum decay*

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### Background effects creating positrons (*W. Greiner et al., 1985*)

- Internal conversion of  $\gamma$ -rays from nuclear states
- External conversion of  $\gamma$ -rays in the target
- External conversion of  $\gamma$ -rays in the detector
- Conversion of  $x$ -rays from nuclear or electronic bremsstrahlung

All these background effects can either be kept under control or they can be neglected.

## Conclusion

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The experimental study of the proposed scenarios would either prove the vacuum decay in the supercritical Coulomb field or lead to discovery of a new physical phenomenon, which can not be described within the presently used QED formalism.

The same scenarios can be applied to observe the vacuum decay in collisions of bare nuclei with neutral atoms.

For details:

*I.A. Maltsev, V.M. Shabaev, R.V. Popov, Y.S. Kozhedub, G. Plunien, X. Ma, Th. Stöhlker, and D.A. Tumakov, Phys. Rev. Lett. 123, 113401 (2019).*

*R.V. Popov, V.M. Shabaev, D.A. Telnov, I.I. Tupitsyn, I.A. Maltsev, Y.S. Kozhedub, A.I. Bondarev, N.V. Kozin, X. Ma, G. Plunien, T. Stöhlker, D.A. Tumakov, and V.A. Zaytsev, Phys. Rev. D 102, 076005 (2020).*

*R.V. Popov, V.M. Shabaev, I.A. Maltsev, D.A. Telnov, N.K. Dulaev, and D.A. Tumakov, arXiv:2303.16288.*