

Background to John Hopkins Hexamethonium Study

- In 2001 Ellen Roche, a 24-year old previously healthy female volunteer, died after participating in a research study at the John Hopkins University Asthma and Allergy Center, Baltimore, Maryland.
- The study was designed to provoke a mild asthma attack in order to help doctors discover the reflex that protects the lungs of healthy people against asthma attacks.
- Volunteer received approximately 1g of hexamethonium by inhalation, to produce symptoms similar to those of an asthma attack.
- Soon afterwards, this volunteer exhibited a dry cough and flu-like symptoms. Her condition worsened, lung tissue disintegrated, kidneys failed and she died two weeks later.
- Investigations into the causes of her death, revealed that while the principle investigators has made a good-faith effort to review the published literature on hexamethonium, they had only searched back as far as 1966 (which is as far back as the Medline database allows you to search). Had they searched the older literature from the 1950s, when hexamethonium was invented, they would have discovered literature highlighting the adverse effects of inhaling hexamethonium.
- John Hopkins Hexamethonium study highlights the potentially fatal consequences of failure to conduct an adequate literature search.
- To read more, please see
The hexamethonium asthma study and the death of a normal volunteer in research. J Savulescu, M Spriggs. Journal of Medical Ethics 2002;28:3-4