

Drug Testing FAQs: What to Know in 2026

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Key Points

Drug testing checks a urine, saliva, blood, hair, or other biological sample for the presence of a drug or its metabolites. It may be used for employment, post-accident review, legal cases, sports, substance use treatment monitoring, or to help confirm medication adherence and misuse concerns.

A drug test can show whether a substance was used within a certain detection window, but it usually does **not** prove current impairment or diagnose addiction by itself.

There are many circumstances that may require drug testing:

- **Pre-employment drug screening test or random, work-related drug testing** to identify on-the-job drug abuse.
- **College or professional athletic** drug testing.
- **Post-accident** drug testing: a vehicular or on-the-job accident which may have involved human error and resulted in casualties or property damage. OSHA and Worker's Compensation insurance may require testing after an on-the-job accident.
- **Safety-related** drug testing: if an employee's job could lead to safety issues if judgement or physical ability were impaired.

Drug testing is often done when applying for employment, especially for positions that may involve federal transportation, airline industries and pilots, bus drivers, trucker drivers, railways, hospitals, and other workplaces where public safety is of the utmost importance.

Workplace drug testing is also common for many other U.S. employers to lessen the impact from drug abuse, safety concerns, and low productivity in the workplace.

A pre-employment drug test typically screens for substances with high abuse potential, including:

- Marijuana (THC)
- Cocaine
- Amphetamines (including methamphetamine)
- Opioids (standard and expanded panels)
- Phencyclidine (PCP)

Alcohol testing may also be included depending on the employer.

In sports, drug testing is often required at the collegiate, professional, and Olympic levels and may include performance-enhancing drugs regulated by the World Anti-Doping Agency, such as:

- Anabolic steroids
- Erythropoietin (EPO)

- Diuretics and masking agents
- Human growth hormone
- Other substances listed on the WADA Prohibited List

How common are positive drug tests?

Recent Quest Diagnostics workforce data suggest that overall workplace drug positivity remains elevated, although it edged down slightly in the newest report.

- In 2024, the combined U.S. workforce urine drug positivity rate was 4.4%, down from 4.6% in 2023, but still part of a decade-long pattern of 4% or higher positivity.
- Marijuana remained the most frequently detected substance in the workforce, holding at 4.5% year over year, while post-accident marijuana positivity remained high at 7.3% in 2024, just below the record 7.5% seen in 2023.

The newer 2025 Quest report also highlights fentanyl as an increasingly important workplace testing issue.

- In 2024, fentanyl positivity in random tests in the general U.S. workforce was 1.13%, compared with 0.14% in pre-employment tests, a more than sevenfold difference.
- Quest also reported that 60% of workforce specimens positive for fentanyl in 2024 were also positive for other drugs.

What happens during workplace drug testing?

For employment or workplace testing, the person is usually directed to a collection site within a specified time. Strict chain-of-custody procedures are used to document specimen handling and reduce the chance of tampering.

Applicants are typically directed to a specific laboratory to submit a sample for drug screening (often for urine test results).

Once at the facility, the applicant must submit a sample at the discretion of the laboratory personnel and in keeping with their standard policies. Hair, sweat, saliva or blood drug test samples may also be used in pre-employment drug screen, although this is not common practice.

Depending on the setting, testing may be pre-employment, random, reasonable suspicion, return-to-duty, follow-up, or post-accident. SAMHSA also notes that workplace drug testing should fit into a broader drug-free workplace program and comply with local, state, and federal laws.

What are the most common types of drug tests?

Urine testing remains the most common workplace drug test because it is practical, widely available, and can detect many substances for hours to days after use, and sometimes much longer for frequent cannabis use.

- Saliva, or oral fluid, is often used when the goal is to detect more recent use and reduce opportunities for adulteration.
- Blood testing is more invasive and is used less often in routine workplace screening, but it may help in emergency or forensic settings.
- Hair testing can look back much farther, often up to about 90 days, though it is less useful for very recent use.

It is important to be sure that the drug testing occurs at a reputable and certified laboratory. Any credible drug screening program will typically involve a two-step process.

- Initial (immunoassay) and confirmatory (gas chromatography-mass spectrometry [GC-MS] test) are the methods most commonly utilized to test for drugs.
- Using a combination of both tests allows a high level of sensitivity and specificity, meaning there is an extremely low chance for false positives or false negatives.

The immunoassay is performed first and is often used as a screening method. If the immunoassay is negative, no further action is typically required, and the results are reported as negative.

If the sample is non-negative, an additional confirmatory GC/MS analysis is performed on a separate portion of the biological sample. The more specific GC/MS is used as a confirmatory test to identify individual drug substances or metabolites and quantify the amount of the substance.

Confirmatory tests, such as GC-MS should be utilized **prior** to reporting positive drug test results to employers.

Urine and oral fluid are the only authorized specimen types for federally mandated, safety-sensitive drug testing. Although oral fluid was added in 2025, urine remains the primary method as implementation of oral fluid testing is still evolving.

Urine

Urine testing remains the most widely used drug test for employment and detects drug metabolites after use, even after the effects have worn off.

Standard panels commonly test for marijuana (delta-9-THC), cocaine, amphetamines (including methamphetamine), phencyclidine (PCP), and opioids such as codeine, morphine, heroin metabolites, and oxycodone, with some expanded panels also including benzodiazepines, barbiturates, methadone, alcohol, or nicotine.

A key 2026 update is that fentanyl has been added to federal drug testing panels (effective July 2025), while traditional 5-panel and 10-panel tests remain widely used. Detection times vary, but most drugs are typically detectable in urine for about 1 to 4 days, with longer detection possible for frequent cannabis use.

5-Panel vs 10-Panel Drug Tests (urine most commonly tested)

- **5-Panel Test (standard):** THC (marijuana); cocaine; amphetamines; PCP; opioids.
- **10-Panel Test (expanded):** Includes all 5-panel drugs, plus: benzodiazepines; barbiturates; methadone; additional prescription or synthetic drugs.

2026 update: Fentanyl is increasingly included in expanded and federal panels; MDMA (ecstasy) and MDA remain included.

Saliva (oral fluid)

Saliva (oral fluid) drug testing, often called a mouth swab test, is commonly used to detect recent drug use, often within hours of exposure. It can typically identify substances within a window of a few hours up to about 48 hours and has a lower risk of tampering compared to urine testing. This method is frequently used for post-accident, random, and roadside testing. It is not ideal to survey long-term use of drugs.

As of 2026, oral fluid testing is formally recognized in federal guidelines, although implementation is still evolving due to a limited number of certified laboratories. Commonly detected substances include THC, cocaine, amphetamines, opioids, benzodiazepines, phencyclidine (PCP), and alcohol.

Saliva is an easy lab test to gather samples, is less susceptible to adulteration or substitution, and can be tested for alcohol, barbiturates, benzodiazepines, cocaine, ecstasy, marijuana (THC), opiates, amphetamines, phencyclidine (PCP), and methamphetamines.

It is suitable for all testing reasons, including pre-employment testing, random and post-accident testing.

Blood

Blood drug testing measures active drug levels in the body and is best for detecting current impairment. It has a short detection window, typically from minutes to hours, and is commonly used in emergency, legal, or DUI settings.

Blood tests can detect substances such as alcohol, fentanyl, cocaine, PCP, nicotine, tramadol, THC, opioids, and amphetamines.

Blood testing may also be performed in the emergency room for toxicology testing, as well.

Blood testing, although highly accurate, is invasive, requiring a needle stick into a vein but there is little chance for adulteration. However, blood analysis often has a short period of detection, as many illicit drugs are metabolized quickly and eliminated from the body.

Hair

Hair drug testing is used to identify long-term patterns of drug use, with a detection window of up to about 90 days. It is difficult to tamper with because samples are collected under supervision, but it is not useful for detecting very recent use within the past few days. In general, hair testing allows the longest time frame to detect drugs of abuse.

Hair tests can detect substances such as THC, cocaine, opioids, amphetamines, phencyclidine (PCP), and ecstasy.

The collector usually takes a 100 gram sample of hair (100 to 120 strands) cut close to the scalp. This method lessens the risk for hair adulteration or substitution, as the sample is collected in full view of the lab personnel.

Rapid tests

Rapid drug tests provide quick screening results, often performed onsite, with results available in minutes to a few hours. They typically use urine or saliva samples and are useful for detecting recent drug use. Rapid tests often can provide a screening result within 4 hours on average.

Rapid screening can allow detection of drugs that might metabolize quickly and not be detectable at a later screening. Screening for most drugs of abuse and alcohol can be performed. Rapid tests can be performed at an employers workplace or at a local, specified laboratory clinic.

Any specimens that screen positive are considered preliminary would still require a confirmatory test. Confirmatory test results are typically available in 2 to 3 days.

How long do drugs stay in your system?

Many variables may affect the amount of time that a drug remains detectable in the urine, saliva or other biological samples, including:

- Drug, dose and frequency of use
- Metabolism
- Amount of body fat

- Drug and Dose
- Test sensitivity
- Subject's state of hydration and fluid balance
- Route(s) of administration
- A drug's half-life (the half-life is the amount of time it takes for half of a drug's concentration to be eliminated from the body). Drugs with shorter half-lives are typically eliminated more quickly. Metabolites may still be detectable in some cases.
- Cut-off concentration used by the testing lab to detect the drug.

A detection window is not the same as intoxication window. Someone may test positive after the period of impairment has already passed, especially with urine or hair testing.

Drug Test Chart and Drug Detection Times*

Drug	Class	Street Name	Prescription Brand Name Examples	Detection Time in Urine (may vary)
Amphetamine	Stimulant	speed	Dexedrine	2 to 3 days or longer
Barbiturates	depressants / sedatives / hypnotics	downers, barbs, reds	Fiorinal (schedule 3) Contains aspirin, butalbital, and caffeine.	short-acting: 2 days long-acting: 1-3 weeks (based on half-life)
Benzodiazepines	depressants / sedatives / hypnotics	bennies	Ativan, Klonopin, Valium, Xanax	therapeutic dose: 3 days; chronic use: 4 to 6 weeks or longer
Cocaine (benzoyl ecgonine metabolite)	Stimulant	coke, crack, rock cocaine	N/A	cocaine urine test: up to 4 days; Heavy use can extend beyond that
Codeine	Analgesic / Opioid	N/A	N/A	1 to 3 days

Drug	Class	Street Name	Prescription Brand Name Examples	Detection Time in Urine (may vary)
Dextroamphetamine	Stimulant	N/A	Xelstryl, Zenzedi	up to 3 days
Ethyl alcohol, alcohol, ethanol	depressants / sedatives / hypnotics	alcohol, liquor, beer, wine, booze	N/A	urine: 12–24 hours typical (longer with heavy use) serum / plasma: 1 to 12 hours
Fentanyl	opioid	China White, Apache, TNT, Goodfella, Cash, Murder 8	N/A	About 1 to 3 days
Heroin	Illicit Opiate	smack, tar, chasing the tiger	N/A	About 1 to 3 days
Marijuana, delta-9-THC (primary tested compound)	Hallucinogen	pot, dope, weed, hash, hemp	Marinol, Syndros (schedule 2, 3), Cesamet (Schedule 2) Epidiolex (not a controlled substance) All prescription products are synthetic	single use: 2 to 7 days for marijuana prolonged, chronic use: 1 to 2 months or longer for marijuana
Methadone	Analgesic / Opiate	fizzies	Methadose	2 to 4 days
Methamphetamine	Stimulant	speed, ice, crystal, crank	Desoxyn	1 to 3 days

Drug	Class	Street Name	Prescription Brand Name Examples	Detection Time in Urine (may vary)
Methaqualone	depressants / sedatives / hypnotics	ludes, disco biscuits, 714, lemmons	Quaalude (withdrawn from U.S. market in 1985) - no longer used clinically	up to 14 days
MDMA (methylenedioxy-methamphetamine)	Stimulant	ecstasy, XTC, ADAM, lover's speed	N/A	1 to 3 days
Morphine	Analgesic / Opiate	N/A	Duramorph PF, Kadian, MS Contin	1 to 3 days
Phencyclidine	Hallucinogen	PCP, angel dust	N/A	14 days, but up to 30 days in chronic users
Propoxyphene withdrawn from U.S. market (2010)	Analgesic / Opiate	N/A	Darvocet, Darvon (all forms of propoxyphene withdrawn from U.S. market in November 2010)	1 to 3 days

***Note:** This table should be used as a general guideline only and detection times may differ. Many variables may affect the amount of time a drug remains detectable. Table adapted from LabCorp / Drugs of Abuse Reference Guide.

Common Drug Testing FAQs

How long does alcohol stay in urine?

Some employees may ask whether alcohol shows up on a drug test. Alcohol itself has a short half-life and is typically detectable in urine for about 2 to 12 hours after drinking, depending on how much was consumed. However, specialized urine tests that look for alcohol metabolites (breakdown products of alcohol), such as ethyl glucuronide (EtG), can detect alcohol use for up to 24 to 72 hours after drinking.

How long does it take to get drug test results?

Results from workplace drug testing are usually available quickly and often returned within a few days. In some cases, employers may use rapid tests that can provide results the same day. Negative results are often reported within 24 hours. However, if the initial screen is non-negative (positive or inconclusive), additional confirmatory testing is required, which may take several days up to one week.

If the initial result is negative, it is typically reported directly to the employer. If a non-negative result occurs, a Medical Review Officer (MRO) will review the findings and contact the applicant for further information.

It is important to inform the laboratory or MRO of any medications being used, including prescription, over-the-counter, or herbal products. The applicant may need to provide proof of a valid prescription and prescriber details for certain medications.

Can a workplace drug test be false positive or false negative?

A common concern with drug testing is the possibility of a false positive or false negative result. Initial screening tests, such as immunoassays, can occasionally produce false positives due to cross-reactivity with certain medications or substances. However, confirmatory testing using highly specific methods like gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (GC-MS) or liquid chromatography–mass spectrometry (LC-MS) greatly reduces this risk and is considered highly accurate.

It is important for individuals undergoing drug testing to provide a complete and accurate history of all prescription, over-the-counter (OTC), and herbal products they are using at the time of testing.

Some substances—both OTC and prescription—have historically been associated with false positives. For example, older testing methods occasionally showed cross-reactivity between decongestants such as ephedrine or pseudoephedrine and amphetamines. However, many modern assays have been improved to minimize these interferences.

Do poppy seeds cause a false positive drug test?

Poppy seeds can sometimes lead to a positive drug test for opiates. This is not technically a false positive, as poppy seeds naturally contain small amounts of morphine and codeine, which may be detected in urine after consumption of foods like bagels or rolls. However, many modern workplace drug tests use higher cutoff levels designed to avoid detecting opiate levels from typical dietary intake.

Some medications can also interfere with initial screening tests. For example, dextromethorphan, a common ingredient in cough suppressants, has occasionally been reported to cause false positives for phencyclidine (PCP) on certain immunoassays. Confirmatory testing using more specific methods can distinguish these substances and rule out false positives.

Additionally, the body metabolizes codeine into morphine, so both substances may appear on a drug test when codeine-containing medications are used.

Does passive smoke inhalation cause a false positive for marijuana?

Passive exposure to marijuana smoke (being in a room where others are smoking) is very unlikely to cause a positive drug test under typical conditions. Workplace drug tests use cutoff levels that are set well above what would be expected from incidental or secondhand exposure. However, extreme exposure in poorly ventilated spaces over prolonged periods could theoretically result in detectable levels, though this is uncommon.

Laboratories also evaluate urine samples for signs of dilution or tampering. For example, a low creatinine level may suggest the sample has been diluted, either by excessive fluid intake before testing or by adding water directly to the specimen. To help prevent tampering, some collection sites use measures such as adding blue dye to toilet water.

Other abnormalities in the urine screen may indicate that results may be a false negative or that there was deliberate adulteration on the sample. For example, creatinine levels are often assessed along with specific gravity to determine whether a sample is overly diluted. Attempts to alter a sample by adding substances may also change the pH, which is routinely tested. These validity checks help ensure the accuracy and reliability of the results.

If a test result is positive, some laboratories may allow the donor to request an independent retest of the original sample. A new sample is generally not accepted for retesting because drug levels may change over time.

Drug test results are handled confidentially and are typically maintained separately from standard employee records.

Will CBD (cannabidiol) cause a positive test for marijuana?

Cannabidiol (CBD) is a compound found in cannabis that has become widely used in the U.S., especially since hemp cultivation was legalized. Hemp-derived CBD products must contain less than 0.3% tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive compound in marijuana responsible for the “high.”

CBD is commonly marketed for conditions such as pain, anxiety, and sleep problems, and is found in products like oils, lotions, and edibles. It is also the active ingredient in the prescription medication Epidiolex, which is approved for certain seizure disorders. Standard workplace drug tests do not typically screen for CBD.

Research suggests that pure CBD is unlikely to cause a positive drug test. However, many over-the-counter CBD products are not tightly regulated and may contain small amounts of THC. Studies have found that some CBD products are mislabeled, with a portion containing detectable THC levels that could lead to a positive test result.

Other cannabinoids, such as cannabinol (CBN), may also rarely interfere with some screening tests, although confirmatory testing using more specific methods can distinguish between different compounds.

Bottom line: CBD itself is unlikely to cause a positive drug test. However, if a CBD product contains THC—even in small amounts—it may result in a positive test, which can be confirmed with more precise laboratory testing.

Can employers drug test in states where marijuana use is legal?

Yes. Employers can still drug test for marijuana in many states, even where recreational or medical use is legal. However, the rules vary widely by state and are continuing to evolve. Because marijuana can remain detectable in the body for days or weeks, an employee may legally use marijuana but still test positive on a later drug test.

In general, many states still allow employers to maintain drug-free workplace policies, including testing for marijuana and taking employment action based on positive results. Marijuana also remains illegal under federal law, which can influence employer policies—especially for federal contractors or safety-sensitive positions.

That said, a growing number of states have enacted employee protections. Some states limit an employer's ability to take action based solely on a positive marijuana test, particularly for off-duty, legal use. Others restrict pre-employment testing or require evidence of impairment on the job rather than just a positive test. Examples of states with some level of employee protection include Maine, Arizona, Minnesota, New York, New Jersey, and California.

At the federal level, marijuana is still classified as a controlled substance, although there has been a proposal to reschedule it from Schedule I to Schedule III. As of 2026, this change has not been fully implemented and would not, by itself, override state laws or eliminate workplace drug testing policies.

Bottom line: Employers can often still drug test for marijuana, even in states where it is legal—but employee protections are increasing, and the legality of workplace testing depends heavily on state law and job type. Employers and employees should review their specific state regulations or seek legal guidance when needed.

IMPORTANT: This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical, legal, or employment advice. Drug testing policies, detection times, and regulations may vary by employer, industry, and location. Test results can be affected by many factors, and a positive screening result should always be confirmed with appropriate laboratory testing.

Always consult a qualified healthcare provider, employer, or legal professional for guidance specific to your situation.

See also

- Anabolic Steroids: Uses, Risks, and Current Trends
- Can a Drug Test Lead to a False Positive?
- The Meaning of Drug Toxicology Reports and Tests
- The Risks for Teenagers of Using Steroids

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Further information

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