



THE PROBLEMS WHEN USING AN “OFF THE SHELF” PERSONAL BREATHALYZER



Alcohol breath testing isn’t just for law enforcement anymore. One of the hottest tech items has been the personal breathalyzer. The small, handheld devices display the user’s breath alcohol concentration (BrAC), either on the item itself or by connecting to a smartphone app. In addition, some of the apps provide options to call a cab, contact a friend for a ride, or locate the nearest hotel.

Priced in America at \$40us to \$150us (\$54 to \$202.50 cdn.), the devices are marketed to the general public as an “accurate tool” for drinkers to track their drinking habits and evaluate their level of intoxication. And the devices are taking off in stores and online. One of the largest brands, BACtrack, states their devices are available at 15,000 retail outlets.

The devices are now coming under fire from a number of fronts. For starters, critics are concerned the devices could actually promote harmful levels of drinking by encouraging people to see just how drunk they can get, or to try to top their friends’ readings. Some users report incorporating the devices and BrAC readings into drinking games, and some devices that connect to smartphones even include games in their apps.

Equally troubling, the accuracy of the devices is questionable. A reporter recently tried out several of the most popular models, and found they gave wildly different readings—varying as much as 0.03% from one brand to another. Other media outlets have had similar findings with personal breathalyzers providing readings below those produced by corrections-grade breath alcohol testers.

That’s a problem when people may rely on portable breath testers as a guideline for driving. Law enforcement agencies and drunk driving advocates share that concern. The manufacturers state that people should not make driving decisions based on a reading. However, users who miss the fine print are likely to see a number of less than 0.08% as permission to get behind the wheel, even if they feel impaired.

Are personal breathalyzers a useful tool to help people better understand how their bodies react to alcohol, or could they actually encourage excessive drinking and impaired driving?

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