

A Guide to **Workplace Drug and Alcohol Testing**





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Introduction

Drug and alcohol misuse not only costs employers through absenteeism and reduced productivity, but may also increase the risk of accidents. Today companies across a wide range of industries are concerned about the effect of drugs and alcohol on business critical decisions as well as safety critical issues.

All organisations can benefit from an agreed policy on alcohol and drug misuse that forms part of an overall health and safety policy. Often known as a SAMP, (Substance and Alcohol Misuse Policy) this type of policy outlines an organisation's principles regarding substance misuse, stipulates a clear process for any testing that will take place and the procedure for dealing with a positive result. For instance, what help will be provided for employees.

Organisations usually decide to include drug and alcohol testing as part of their policy if they employ staff in safety critical positions, or for pre-assignment (e.g. to a higher risk position). Other situations where substance abuse testing is often used include:

- **Prior to a critical hire.**
- **After a significant or serious incident as part of a full investigation.**
- **With reasonable cause (i.e. to believe someone is unfit due to alcohol or drug use).**
- **As a condition of return to work after attending a treatment program or after a policy violation.**
- **As a condition of continued employment after a policy violation**
- **As part of a monitoring agreement after treatment.**
- **Monitoring of a strict no drugs policy**

For those organisations that choose to introduce testing, consideration needs to be paid to the drug testing process itself; including the type of testing, how the sample is collected and what they will do with the information generated.

This short guide is designed to provide those considering adopting a Programme of Testing an introduction to the complex area of substance testing or screening.

1. Overview of the tests

To start with, your choice of test method will depend on your Substance and Alcohol Misuse Policy, test policy and organisational needs – for example, **whether you need to detect acute (immediate) use or historical substance use, and the types of job your staff do.**

Pre-Employment Testing

A pre-employment drug test is a screening service used to determine whether a potential hire abuses drugs or alcohol.

Tests can be completed using urine, hair, nail clippings, blood, or saliva. How a test is performed can depend on cost and the testing time frame. While urine or oral fluid drug tests can show if the employee misused drugs recently, hair drug tests can provide information from 30 days to several months.

Random Testing

Organisations may use random testing to deter employee workplace drug-use. Random testing can require unannounced screening across a business on a given day and can include a random selection (5% for instance) of all personnel on the site.

Urine or oral fluid are the most commonly used samples for this type of testing.

Continual Monitoring

There may be a need to monitor an abstinence from drug or alcohol misuse. This could be part of a rehabilitation programme or following a positive drug or alcohol test.

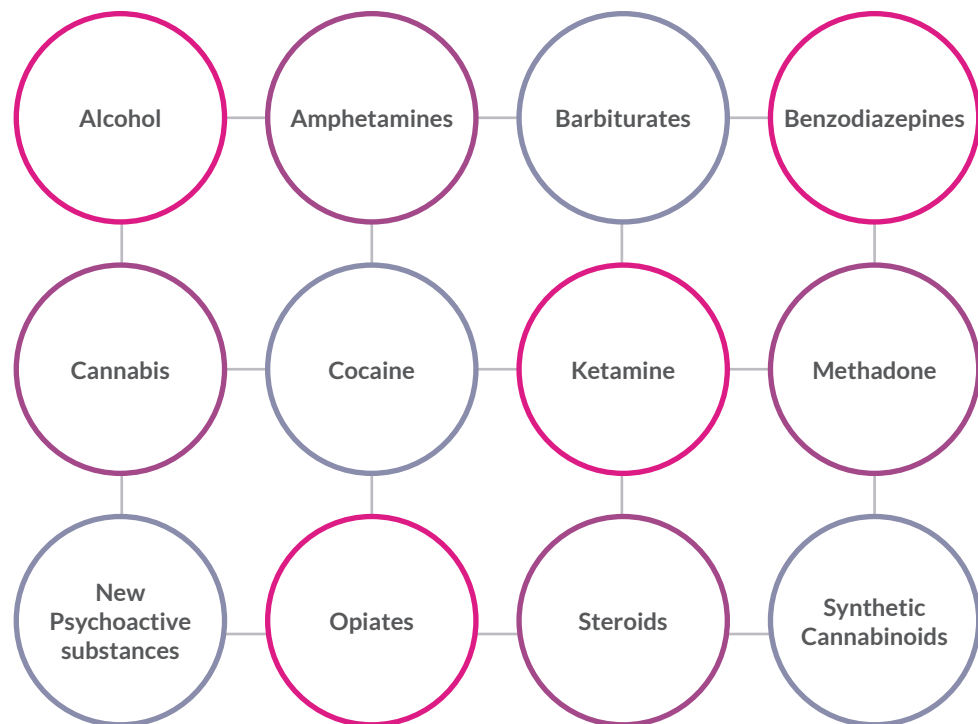
Oral fluid or urine tests will provide information concerning recent use; whereas hair analysis can provide evidence of drug misuse up to 12 months and beyond or six months for chronic alcohol misuse.

With Cause or Post Incident Testing

In specific circumstances, such as after an accident or incident, where there is suspicion of drinking or drug use that contravenes the company's regulations, you may require a breathalyser will give you an immediate result for alcohol, while oral fluid or urine testing can provide an accurate indication of any substance misuse at the time of testing.

2. What substances can be tested?

A wide range of substances can be detected; **the most common drug tests in the workplace are for the following:**



3. What time frame do I need to review?

Are you screening for short or long term use – or both? Different tests are used for different windows of detection.

A narrow or wide window refers to the time that a drug can be detected above a specified level. Are you trying to establish substance use over time, the last three months for example, or do you need to know that an employee has not used a particular substance over the last 24 hours?

Type of test	Narrow window	Wide window
Detection period	For substance use in the past 24 hours – 1 week (according to test method used)	For substance use over the past 3 months
Substances detected	Named drugs and alcohol	Named drugs and alcohol
Processing time for result	Instant	Up to 48 hours after laboratory receives sample
Type of result offered (conclusive or preliminary)	Presumptive positives, which must be confirmed by additional laboratory testing	Conclusive and accurate

Table 1. Identifying your test window

4. Choosing the right test

Your testing regime should be designed according to your organisational needs, your budget and the conditions set out in your Substance and Alcohol Misuse Policy.

Employers face a difficult task to choose the best sample to use. The three common samples – urine, saliva and hair – each have different advantages depending on the purpose of the test and they can be complementary in different situations. There is not a best sample for drug or alcohol analysis, just the ideal sample for a particular purpose.



Urine Tests

Point of Care urine tests (POC) are most common in UK workplaces – being inexpensive, simple to perform and providing instant results.

Urine tests are conducted on-location by a trained collector using mobile equipment. The process is usually unobserved. If the sample is negative at this screening stage, the drug testing process is complete. There is no further analysis needed. If it is not negative, or presumptively positive, another test is performed by the laboratory using a different technique to confirm the screening test.

However, an individual can abstain from substance use for the few days before the test to achieve a negative result. It's also possible to cheat a urine test using 'clean' urine purchased online, as collection is unobserved.



Oral Fluid Tests

Oral fluid test results can be offered instantly, using POC tests. As well as screening for only a limited range of substances, POC tests can sometimes provide false negatives – requiring the need for a laboratory confirmed result.

Alternatively, samples can be sent to a laboratory (Back to Lab) and tested with greater accuracy. A laboratory test offers complete accuracy for detecting drug and alcohol use. An Oral Fluid Test is collected from the donor using a small absorbent pad, then sealed and forwarded to a laboratory for analysis.

Samples can be collected with supervision, which often isn't possible with workplace urine testing.



Hair Tests

Under controlled conditions; a sample of hair – usually the thickness of a shoelace – is cut from the scalp using scissors. The sample is immediately deposited in a tin foil wrap provided by the testing laboratory. The collector must indicate which end of the hair came from the scalp – as this will determine which hair section reflects each period of drug or alcohol use.





Nail Tests


If hair testing is not possible, nail testing can be used to detect drug and alcohol use across long detection windows of between two weeks and eight months – a figure which varies according to whether the sample is a fingernail or toenail.


Unlike hair testing, however, nail tests cannot be used to indicate patterns of substance use – only indicating if a substance was used, not when.



Test	When to use	Type of test	Time to results
 Urine Test	Random testing and with cause testing. When an individual has a history of substance misuse and must be tested over a long period to monitor for abuse. In this case, multiple tests should be taken over a period of weeks.	Back to Lab (BTL) or Point of Care (POC)	For point of care tests: Instant For BTL tests: up to 48 hours after laboratory receives sample
Collection procedure	Window of detection	Advantages	Disadvantages
The donor is asked to urinate into a cup, possibly with supervision to prevent tampering	0.5 – 5 days (although some substances can stay in donor’s system longer)	Able to assess acute drug intake Cost-effective test method Large specimen volume enables retesting	Medical condition or shy bladder may prevent donor from producing sample on demand Samples can be tampered with (including dilution using water) Not an observed sample collection Presumed positive results from point of care urine tests must be confirmed by back to the lab tests

Test	When to use	Type of test	Time to results
 Oral Fluid Test	Random testing and with cause testing. Often used to confirm results of other types of test.	Back to Lab (BTL) or Point of Care (POC)	For point of care tests: Instant For BTL tests: up to 48 hours after laboratory receives sample
Collection procedure	Window of detection	Advantages	Disadvantages
An absorbent material is pressed into the mouth to take sample	0 – 2 days	Simple collection method Low risk of tampering Suitable for mass screening	Low volume of sample means retesting is difficult Donor anxiety can cause dry mouth and make collection difficult

Test	When to use	Type of test	Time to results
 Hair Test	Pre-employment testing. Monitoring. When screening for long-term substance abuse and assessment is required to go back months.	Back to Lab (BTL)	Variable, depending on laboratory. Can be as little as 48 hours after laboratory receives sample.
Collection procedure	Window of detection	Advantages	Disadvantages
A sample of hair is cut, usually the thickness of a shoelace. If the donor has no hair on their head, sample will be taken from elsewhere on the body.	Typically for alcohol: 0 – 6 months Typically for drugs: 7 days – 12 months	Able to detect usage over long periods Non-invasive collection Difficult to subvert test Body hair can also be used Requires a small sample size Suitable for mass screening	Hair tests cannot precisely determine the quantity of substances used by the donor. Samples cannot indicate substance misuse less than 7 days after the incident

Test	When to use	Type of test	Time to results
 Nail Test	When hair testing isn't practically possible.	Back to Lab (BTL)	As with hair testing, 48 hours or more, depending upon laboratory.
Collection procedure	Window of detection	Advantages	Disadvantages
Finger or toe nail clipping	The detection window is dependent on the type of nail clipping. A three-millimetre fingernail clipping might offer a six-month exposure history. A three-millimetre toenail clipping might offer a 12-month exposure history.	Able to detect usage over long periods Non-invasive collection Difficult to subvert test Requires a small sample size Suitable for mass screening	Method cannot be used to detect recent substance use. Sample collection is only possible with fingernails or toenails over a certain length. Toenail samples must not be collected if the donor suffers from peripheral artery disease or diabetes.

A note about Point of Care Tests

Instant test results also require an instant response by the employer, even though at this stage it is only a presumptive positive result. This is because prescribed or over the counter medication can cause this result therefore it must be confirmed by more accurate laboratory (BTL) test. For example, an individual might test positive for opiate use with a POC test – even if the opiate is codeine, prescribed for medicinal reasons.

A presumptive positive result will typically require the employer to suspend their employee, pending the results of the new test.

5. Collections

By working with trained collectors, you can be sure that samples are taken, transported and tested according to strict protocols. They will document the full chain of custody so there's zero risk of tampering. Alternatively, named staff members can be trained to collect hair and saliva samples.



6. Interpreting results from Back to Lab tests

Where possible toxicologist's interpretation of the test results conclusion should state:

- Whether the donor used or did not use a named substance within an estimated timeframe, and whether their level of use was within low, medium or high ranges indicated by other positive samples.
- Whether their substance use was chronic or sporadic over the estimated time frame, or why the type of test performed cannot offer this information.
- For hair tests, if the test was performed in multiple segments, they might give an indication whether drugs were used on more than one occasion.
- Whether any additional circumstances affected the test result and the accuracy of the result – for example, if the hair sample was bleached before testing – and whether this should affect the judgement reached about the donor's substance use.
- For alcohol tests, how the donor's substance use compares to averages offered by the WHO (World Health Organisation) and other medical bodies, and contextual information around these averages – for example, the number of units of alcohol included in different measures of alcohol.

How long will we wait for results?

Point-of-care tests offer results in minutes. Results from Laboratories tests take as little as 3 days or less, depending on the laboratory chosen.

What if the result is positive?

Your Substance and Alcohol Misuse Policy must state clear policies, which set out what action will be taken if a test comes back positive. Depending on your company's policy, failing a drug test could lead to disciplinary action or the employee being dismissed.

If your company has a zero tolerance policy to drugs, just the positive result could be seen as gross misconduct and the employee suspended while there is an investigation.

Where the employee has a substance abuse problem, an employer may decide that referring them to a specialist for assistance is the preferable option.

7. Frequently asked questions

Are employers required by law to test their employees for substance use?

Employers are not required by law to test their employees, but both employers and employees have a legal and fiduciary duty to ensure their workplace is free from evidence of, and the effect of, substance misuse.

What is a SAMP?

SAMP refers to a Substance and Alcohol Misuse Policy; a document outlining an employers' obligations towards, and process for dealing with, substance misuse in a workplace.

What is a POT?

POT refers to a Programme of Testing; the documented system and processes put in place by organisations to detect substance misuse by their employees.

What is an EAP?

EAP refers to an Employee Assistance Programme. Before implementing a new POT, employees should be offered an amnesty period when they are able to admit using a substance that would be detected by the POT. They might seek support for their addiction from their employer, if this is provided for by their employer's Substance and Alcohol Misuse Policy.

What is point of care testing?

Point of care testing is sometimes referred to as "POC" tests are those conducted on-location by a trained collector using mobile equipment. While they offer near-instant results, these results are typically less accurate than those offered by "Back To Lab" testing. Point of care testing also only offers presumptive positive results, which must be confirmed by secondary tests. Urine tests are most typically used as point of care tests in the workplace.

What is Back To Lab testing?

Back to the lab tests are those that require samples to be sent and analysed at a qualified laboratory. While the results of these tests are not instant, they are conclusive and typically more accurate than point of care tests.

How accurate is hair, oral fluid and nail testing?

Oral fluid testing using LC-MS/MS offers complete accuracy for detecting drug use.

Hair and nail testing using LC-MS/MS offers complete accuracy, provided the context for drug use is known. Context in this case means whether an individual claims to have used the drug or only been in the same environment as someone else using it.

How can a hair test detect alcohol abuse?

A hair alcohol test detects two types of alcohol biomarkers, (FAEE) and ETG as standard to help in the assessment of chronic excessive alcohol consumption.

Can back to the lab testing indicate the amount of drugs or alcohol an individual used?

No. Tests are designed to indicate whether an individual used a substance or not, in the timeframe covered by the sample.

Some laboratories may claim to offer reliable analysis of the amount of alcohol or drugs consumed by an individual. However, these claims are not scientifically proven.

How far back can hair and oral fluid testing detect drug use?

Hair testing typically detects drug or alcohol use from seven days to approximately six months after the event, depending on the length of the hair. Oral fluid testing can detect acute (immediate) use and use up to two days later.

How long do back to lab results take?

Cansford guarantees a 48-hour turnaround time for all oral fluid and hair tests, from sample collection to delivery of results.

What substances can back to the lab testing detect?

A wide range of substances and their metabolites. Page six of this guide provides a list of the common substances tested.

Can back to the lab test results be used in employment courts?

Yes. Results certificates provided by an UKAS 17025-accredited laboratory are designed to be clear, comprehensive and admissible as evidence in court.



About Cansford Laboratories

Cansford Laboratories offers the UK's fastest workplace drug and alcohol testing services – keeping you and your employees safe with the right test, at the right time.

We first pioneered hair testing as a detection method 25 years ago. Today, we offer a range of tests that can quickly establish levels of substance use over a period of up to 12 months – and can make a clear distinction between casual use and chronic dependency. Our sampling and detection service is used by the legal profession, employers, clinics, schools and government bodies throughout the UK.

Our laboratory offers:

- An UKAS 17025-accredited laboratory
- Hair and Oral Fluid back to the lab testing
- Expert witness support
- 48-hour back to the lab testing
- Detailed, fast analytical result reporting





Cansford Laboratories

Pioneering drug and alcohol testing

To find out more or enquire about
hair drug and alcohol testing:

Call: 029 2054 0567

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