

PARTNER UPDATE

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Workplace Drug Testing: Are you Choosing the Right Test?

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Urine

The most common test used for workplace drug testing is the urine drug test. Urine tests have some shortcomings in that they are vulnerable to being diluted, substituted, or adulterated. Most drugs are detectable in urine for only about two to four days after drug use. Because of these limitations, urine testing may not be the best choice for every situation. Sometimes, alternative specimens like hair or oral fluid might be preferable.

Hair

The second most common specimen for employee drug testing is hair. Unlike urine, hair samples are collected under direct observation, minimizing the risk of tampering. Drugs are typically detectable in hair samples for about three months, but do not initially appear until several days after drug use. This makes hair sampling good for detecting repeated drug use over a long period of time, but not useful for detecting single dose or recent drug use. Hair sampling is best suited for pre-employment or random testing, but not well-suited for post-accident or reasonable suspicion testing. Hair testing does not detect alcohol.

Oral Fluid

The next most common alternative to urine testing is oral fluid testing. As with hair, oral fluid collection is conducted under direct observation, thereby reducing the risk of tampering. Drugs are typically detectable in oral fluid for one to two days after use. A notable exception is THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, which has a window of detection up to 14 hours. This close correlation between time of drug use and time of collection makes oral fluid a good specimen for post-accident and reasonable suspicion testing. Alcohol can be detected with oral fluid testing.

Nails

Using nails for drug testing has several limitations including possible environmental contamination, inability to detect alcohol, and a limited number of laboratories that test nails for drugs. Further, there are insufficient scientific data to support the routine use of nail specimens for workplace drug testing. Blood is the specimen that most closely correlates with drug use, but blood collection is invasive, testing is expensive, and there is an infection risk to the collector.

It is important to recognize that a positive drug test, regardless of specimen type, does not necessarily indicate intoxication. It simply indicates that at some time in the past the drug was in the body, and at the time of specimen collection the drug had come out of the body into hair, oral fluid, nails, or urine. By applying the time frames in which drugs are detected in various types of specimens, an employer can tailor a workplace drug testing program to the specific goals of the company.

About WorkPartners OHS

Located in North San Diego County (Oceanside and Vista), WorkPartners OHS clinics are full service Occupational Health programs dedicated to supporting the health and wellness of your employees. Visit us on the web at www.WorkPartnersOHS.com.

