

Pros and Cons of Various Drug Testing Methods

Types of Tests	Pros	Cons	Window of Detection	Comments
Urine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highest assurance of reliable results • Least expensive • Most flexibility in testing different drugs, including alcohol and nicotine • Most likely of all drug testing methods to withstand legal challenge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specimen can be adulterated, substituted, or diluted • Limited window of detection • Test sometimes viewed as invasive or embarrassing • Biological hazard for specimen handling and shipping to lab 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typically 1 to 5 days • Longer for marijuana 	Traditional testing used since 1983. GC/MS confirmation is considered gold standard of drug testing. Acceptable for all testing categories. Both lab and instant testing available.
Hair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer window of detection • Greater stability (does not deteriorate) • Can measure chronic drug use • Convenient shipping and storage (no need to refrigerate) • Collection procedure not considered invasive or embarrassing • More difficult to adulterate than urine • Detects alcohol/cocaine combination use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More expensive • Test usually limited to basic 5-drug panel • Cannot detect alcohol use • Will not detect very recent drug use (1 to 7 days prior to test) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depends on the length of hair in the sample • Hair grows about a half-inch per month, so a 1-1/2 inch specimen would show a 3-month history. 	New federal guidelines propose that head hair should be the only type of hair to be used for pre-employment, random, return-to-duty, and follow-up testing. Because of detection times not to be used for post-accident and reasonable suspicion testing.
Oral Fluids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sample obtained under direct observation • Minimal risk of tampering • Non-invasive • Samples can be collected easily in virtually any environment • Can detect alcohol use • Reflects recent drug use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drugs and drug metabolites do not remain in oral fluids as long as they do in urine • Less efficient than other testing methods in detecting marijuana use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 10 to 24 hours 	Used primarily for post-accident and reasonable suspicion testing. Some companies are using for pre-employment. Not to be used for return-to-duty and follow-up testing. Both lab and instant testing available.
Sweat Patch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-invasive • Variable removal date (generally 1 to 7 days) • Quick application and removal • Longer window of detection than urine • No sample substitution possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited number of labs able to process results • People with skin eruptions, excessive hair, or cuts and abrasions cannot wear the patch • Passive exposure to drugs may contaminate patch and affect results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patch retains evidence of drug use for at least 7 days, and can detect even low levels of drugs 2 to 5 hours after last use 	Used primarily for follow-up testing and return-to-duty testing. Patch is applied to upper arm and back.

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