

# Alcohol testing in the workplace



**In workplace programs, testing for alcohol may be accomplished using a variety of specimen types such as urine, oral fluid, blood, and breath. When performed properly, all alcohol screening methods are sound. The selection of the specific specimen type should be based on the goals of the drug and alcohol testing program and how the results will be used.**

Ethyl alcohol, or ethanol, is an intoxicating ingredient found in beer, wine, and liquor produced by the fermentation of yeast, sugars, and starches. In addition, sources of alcohol and exposure can include over-the-counter medications like cough syrup, household products such as hand sanitizer, cosmetics, perfumes, cleaning sprays, laundry detergent, antiperspirant, aftershave, and hair spray as well as cooking products such as vanilla and soy sauce. Intoxication can impair brain function, motor skills, cognitive abilities, decision making, and, as a result, one's ability to work. Employees who habitually consume excessive amounts of alcohol may have a tendency to frequently be tardy, absent from work, suffer from health problems, and pose a greater risk of harming themselves and others.

## Urine alcohol testing

Urine is the most commonly used specimen for testing for a wide variety of both illicit and prescription drugs. However, urine is less frequently used for alcohol screening, especially in post-incident or reasonable suspicion drug testing scenarios. While urine will



detect the recent use of a substance, a positive test does not necessarily mean that an individual was “under the influence” at the time of the drug test collection, nor can it indicate how frequently a substance was used or when it was last used. Therefore, a testing method other than urine is typically recommended for alcohol testing.

## Saliva alcohol testing

Many workplace programs use saliva to screen for alcohol use and, in addition, it is an alcohol testing method recognized by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). Saliva alcohol testing can be used for pre-employment, reasonable suspicion, follow-up and post-accident testing. It is also a convenient option because a trained screening technician can perform an on-site collection in the workplace. This eliminates the need to send the donor to a collection site, unless there is a non-negative screen result requiring confirmation.



One saliva option is the Q.E.D.<sup>®</sup> instant alcohol test which provides quantitative results in a matter of minutes using an easy-to-read thermometer-like device. We recommend that employers check the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Conforming Products List (NHTSA-CPL) to ensure a saliva alcohol screening device is approved for use in DOT-mandated programs. While there is a high degree of correlation between blood and saliva alcohol levels, any presumptive positive saliva test result will need to be confirmed. While a positive screen can be confirmed using either a blood or breath test, DOT rules require confirmation using breath alcohol.

## Blood alcohol testing

Blood alcohol testing is less commonly used for workplace alcohol screening purposes and is more likely to be used for confirmatory purposes when there is a presumptive positive alcohol screening result. There are a number of studies and research that correlate blood alcohol levels to performance and impairment. Most U.S. states use a cut off of 0.08 gm% as a presumption of impairment for the operation of a motor vehicle. Venipuncture, or the drawing of blood through a needle, makes the collection of a specimen for blood alcohol testing more invasive and requires an experienced phlebotomist.



## Breath alcohol testing

Evidential breath testing (EBT) for alcohol is used in both DOT-mandated and workplace alcohol testing programs. EBTs can be utilized for both alcohol screening and confirmatory purposes. The test may be performed at a third-party location or on-site at the employer's location by a trained breath alcohol technician (BAT). Several breath alcohol screening device options are available. Many devices are approved for DOT alcohol testing programs and appear on the NHTSA-CPL. A presumptive positive alcohol test obtained using any of these devices will also need to be confirmed with the permitted confirmatory method. The correlation between breath and blood alcohol results is well-documented and the results of these tests are commonly used as evidence of impairment or "fitness for duty."



Employers have several options when choosing the specimen type for alcohol testing in the workplace. Each testing method has advantages that an organization can match to the specific needs of its program. Carefully weigh each option against the needs of the employee population and select any one of the scientifically accurate alcohol testing methods. In the end, just as it is with a drug testing program, implementing an alcohol testing program is always a sound decision.

For more information about alcohol testing, call **1.800.877.7484** or visit **[EmployerSolutions.com](http://EmployerSolutions.com)**.

**"Out of millions who hold full time employment in the United States, close to 15 million are heavy drinkers of alcohol, exacting a high cost on work organizations, as employees who drink a lot are often absent from work, suffer from a lot of health problems, and are at a greater risk of harming themselves and others,"**

**- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc.**

