

From National Institute on Drug Abuse Website

Frequently Asked Questions About Drug Testing in Schools

What is drug testing?

Some schools, hospitals, or places of employment conduct drug testing. There are a number of ways this can be done, including: pre-employment testing, random testing, reasonable suspicion/cause testing, post-accident testing, return to duty testing, and follow-up testing. This usually involves collecting urine samples to test for drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines, PCP, and opiates.

Following models established in the workplace, some schools have initiated random drug testing and/or reasonable suspicion/cause testing. During random testing schools select, using a random process (like flipping a coin), one or more individuals from the student population to undergo drug testing. Currently, random drug testing can only be conducted among students who participate in competitive extracurricular activities. Reasonable suspicion/cause testing involves a school requiring a student to provide a urine specimen when there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the student may have used an illicit substance. Typically, this involves the direct observations made by school officials that a student has used or possesses illicit substances, exhibits physical symptoms of being under the influence, and has patterns of abnormal or erratic behavior.

Why do some schools want to conduct random drug tests?

Schools that have adopted random student drug testing are hoping to decrease drug abuse among students via two routes. First, schools that conduct testing hope that random testing will serve as a deterrent, and give students a reason to resist peer pressure to take drugs. Secondly, drug testing can identify adolescents who have started using drugs so that interventions can occur early, or identify adolescents who already have drug problems, so they can be referred for treatment. Drug abuse not only interferes with a student's ability to learn, but it can also disrupt the teaching environment, affecting other students as well.

Is student drug testing a stand-alone solution, or do schools need other programs to prevent and reduce drug use?

Drug testing should never be undertaken as a stand-alone response to a drug problem. If testing is done, it should be a component of broader prevention, intervention and treatment programs, with the common goal of reducing students' drug use.

If a student tests positive for drugs, should that student face disciplinary consequences?

The primary purpose of drug testing is not to punish students who use drugs but to prevent drug abuse and to help students already using become drug-free. The results of a positive drug test should be used to intervene with students who do not yet have drug problems, through counseling and follow-up testing. For students that are diagnosed with addiction, parents and a school administrator can refer them to effective drug treatment programs, to begin the recovery process.

Why test teenagers at all?

Teens are especially vulnerable to drug abuse, when the brain and body are still developing. Most teens do not use drugs, but for those who do, it can lead to a wide range of adverse effects on the brain, the body, behavior and health.

Short term: Even a single use of an intoxicating drug can affect a person's judgment and decisionmaking—resulting in accidents, poor performance in a school or sports activity, unplanned risky behavior, and the risk of overdosing.

Long term: Repeated drug abuse can lead to serious problems, such as poor academic outcomes, mood changes (depending on the drug: depression, anxiety, paranoia, psychosis), and social or family problems caused or worsened by drugs.

Repeated drug use can also lead to the disease of addiction. Studies show that the earlier a teen begins using drugs, the more likely he or she will develop a substance abuse problem or addiction. Conversely, if teens stay away from drugs while in high school, they are less likely to develop a substance abuse problem later in life.

How many students actually use drugs?

Drug use among high schools students has dropped significantly since 2001. In December, the 2007 Monitoring the Future study of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders showed that drug use had declined by 24 percent since 2001.

Despite this marked decline, much remains to be done. Almost 50 percent of 12th graders say that they've used drugs at least once in their lifetime, and 18 percent report using marijuana in the last month. Prescription drug abuse is high—with nearly 1 in 10 high school seniors reporting non-medical use of the prescription painkiller Vicodin in the past year.

What testing methods are available?

There are several testing methods available that use urine, hair, oral fluids, and sweat (patch). These methods vary in cost, reliability, drugs detected, and detection period. Schools can determine their needs and choose the method that best suits their requirements, as long as the testing kits are from a reliable source.

Which drugs can be tested for?

Various testing methods normally test for a "panel" of drugs. Typically, a drug panel tests for marijuana, cocaine, opioids, amphetamines, and PCP. If a school has a particular problem with other drugs, such as MDMA, GHB, or steroids, they can include testing for these drugs as well.

What about alcohol?

Alcohol is a drug, and its use is a serious problem among young people. However, alcohol does not remain in the blood long enough for most tests to detect recent use. Breathalyzers and oral fluid tests can detect current use. Adolescents with substance abuse problems are often polydrug users (they use more than one drug) so identifying a problem with an illicit or prescription drug may also suggest an alcohol problem.

How accurate are drug tests? Is there a possibility a test could give a false positive?

Tests are very accurate but not 100 percent accurate. Usually samples are divided so if an initial test is positive a confirmation test can be conducted. Federal guidelines are in place to ensure accuracy and fairness in drug testing programs.

Can students "beat" the tests?

Many drug-using students are aware of techniques that supposedly detoxify their systems or mask their drug use. Popular magazines and Internet sites give advice on how to dilute urine samples, and there are even companies that sell clean urine or products designed to distort test results. A number of techniques and products are focused on urine tests for marijuana, but masking products increasingly are becoming available for tests of hair, oral fluids, and multiple drugs.

Most of these products do not work, are very costly, are easily identified in the testing process and need to be on hand constantly, because of the very nature of random testing. Moreover, even if the specific drug is successfully masked, the product itself can be detected, in which case the student using it would become an obvious candidate for additional screening and attention. In fact, some testing programs label a test "positive" if a masking product is detected.

Is random drug testing of students legal?

In June 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court broadened the authority of public schools to test students for illegal drugs. Voting 5 to 4 in *Pottawatomie County v. Earls*, the court ruled to allow random drug tests for all middle and high school students participating in competitive extracurricular activities. The ruling greatly expanded the scope of school drug testing, which previously had been allowed only for student athletes.

Just because the U.S. Supreme Court said student drug testing for adolescents in competitive extracurricular activities is constitutional, does that mean it is legal in my city or state?

A school or school district that is interested in adopting a student drug testing program should seek legal expertise so that it complies with all federal, state, and local laws. Individual state constitutions may dictate different legal thresholds for allowing student drug testing. Communities interested in starting student drug testing programs should become familiar with the law in their respective states to ensure proper compliance.

What has research determined about the utility of random drug tests in schools?

There is not very much research in this area, and the early research shows mixed results. A study published in 2007 (Goldberg et al, J. Adolesc Health, 41: 421-29, 2007) found that student athletes who participated in randomized drug testing had overall rates of drug use similar to students who did not take part in the program, and in fact some indicators of future drug abuse increased among those participating in the drug testing program. Because of the limited number of studies on this topic more research is warranted.

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