

Drug testing



Report by Dr Dan Hegarty of Express Medicals Ltd.

Drug testing is an established requirement for workers in the rail sector.

Employers, trade unions, staff and the public all acknowledge the wisdom of testing. Safety critical railway workers undergo drug testing at the pre-employment stage and in accordance, thereafter, with the protocols of the relevant railway standards.

Most readers will be familiar with chain-of-custody urine testing. The collection method is designed to prevent any tampering with the sample, albeit in the form of dilution with water or contamination with another substance.

Although urine testing is still the accepted norm, people often enquire about other methods of drug testing. These include hair and saliva testing. This causes quite a bit of confusion. Which method is best?

The advantages of urine collection are :-

- This method is an industry standard.
- There is good scientific support for its use.
- There are robust and historically proven procedures around the method.
- Recommended guidelines and cut-off levels are available.
- Urine testing is ideal for random testing.
- Urine testing is suitable for post-incident / for cause testing.
- Urine testing is a good method for pre-employment testing.
- Urine testing is economical for client companies.
- The disadvantages of urine collection are :-
- It can seem to be invasive.
- There is a short time-frame for some drugs (ie. approx. 4 days).

The advantages of hair testing are :-

- Drug detection can be over a number of months. An historic 3-month time-frame is certainly achievable.
- Samples are very easy to collect.
- The method is not too invasive.
- Hair testing is ideal for pre-employment testing.
- Hair testing can be used for random testing.
- The disadvantages of hair testing are :-
- There are no firmly established guidelines yet.
- This method can be quite expensive.
- Hair testing is not suitable for post-incident / for cause collections.

The advantages of oral fluid testing are :-

- Samples are very easy to collect.
- Individuals often find this method none too invasive.
- This method is a possible alternative to urine testing.
- Saliva / oral fluid testing has a possible role in post incident / for cause testing.

The disadvantages of oral fluid testing are :-

- There are no established guidelines yet.
- There is much less historical scientific data available to support the method.
- The window of detection is very short (24 / 48 hours). Due to the short time that drugs are detectable in oral fluid, it can be the least effective method of spotting drug use.
- Hair testing is often the most expensive method. However, it is very effective at detecting drug use in pre-employment sampling. This means that it can be much more economical than it appears at first sight.
- For the time being urine testing remains the most legally robust method available to the rail sector. However, much work is being done to develop and standardise other methods.
- Express Medicals Ltd has over 14 years experience of collecting samples for drug testing throughout Great Britain and beyond. The company works with UKAS-accredited laboratory, LGC Forensics.
- LGC can date its history back to the 1840s from when it functioned as the Government Chemist. It has been a private company since 1986 and is now the largest independent forensic provider in Europe with 2,000+ staff.
- All samples are processed in the most stringent of methods available today and collecting and testing services are backed up with a host of allied / supporting services. These include policy advice, training seminars and an in-house team of medical review officers and expert toxicological witnesses.

For more information please visit our website: www.expressmedicals.co.uk or call 020 7394 1788.