

Students

Drug Testing: The 'Study-Free' Test

by [Mary Ellen Nunes](#)

Question: What is the one test you'll never have to study for—but the results are critical to getting a job?

Answer: A drug screening test. Drug tests can identify alcohol, prescription drugs, and illegal drugs. Following are some questions frequently asked about drug tests.

Do I have to take the test? To decrease the chances of hiring a drug user, some employers require anyone offered a job to take a drug test. The job offer depends on receiving a negative drug test result. So, if you want the job, you must take the test.

How does it work? You'll probably be asked to take a urine test, the most popular method of drug screening. The test is used, for example, by the U.S. Department of Transportation for its more than 8 million workers.

Urine test: The test examines a urine sample for five major controlled substances: cocaine, opiates, marijuana, PCP, and amphetamines. You may also be asked to take a test of blood, hair, or sweat.

Blood test: A blood test measures the actual amount of alcohol or other drugs in your blood at the time of the test.

Hair test: Researchers study hair to detect drug use. Hair grows about 1/64 of an inch each day: two inches of hair gives a 128-day history of your drug use.

Breath alcohol test: The breath test shows how much alcohol is in the blood at the time of the test.

How accurate are the tests? Tests are accurate if they are done using the guidelines of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The guidelines include:

- a specific chain of custody to document handling and storing your urine specimen;
- an initial screen (and a second test if the initial screen is positive);
- a confirmatory test to rule out false positives; and
- a review by a medical officer to make sure there are no medical or other reasons for a positive test.

Can I drink something to hide the drugs? There are many schemes for hiding drug use—and most don't work. There are several different steps during the testing process that pick up on masking agents. "It's difficult to get around a positive result," according to Moore.

What about poppy seeds? Eating enough poppy seeds can cause your urine to test positive for opiates—three poppy seed bagels, for example could generate a positive test result. However, there is an additional test that looks for certain chemicals present in heroin that are not present in poppy seeds.

What if I test positive? A positive drug test may prevent you from getting a job. When a positive drug test is reported, the amount of the drug(s) found is usually not reported.

How long can I test positive after using a drug? This depends on the type of drugs you use and the type of test you take. It takes from a day to more than a month for some drugs to clear your urine; it may take much longer for your hair to grow and be cut so that drugs don't show up.

Should I insist on a second test if I know I've received a false positive? If you have a positive result, and you have never used drugs, speak to the medical review officer. In a thorough test, an initial positive must be followed up with secondary tests to verify the results. Because there are varying levels of sensitivity to certain chemicals, prescription medication, and over-the-counter medications, a little research may be necessary to find out why your test reacted positively.

Who will see the results of the test? The results of your test should be kept confidential, meaning that only people who need to know will receive the drug test results. This might be a supervisor, manager, union representative, or someone in the medical or personnel department. You may be asked to sign a release form that states who will receive the test results.