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DRUG TESTING...ONE TEST TEENS DON'T WANT TO FAIL

Whether they just had a few hits or were in a room where others were smoking, we know teens are looking for information about how drug tests work and how they can get a "negative" reading. As we tell them, the only guaranteed way to pass a drug test is to not use drugs or spend extensive time around others who do. But there are a few more things you should know, so here are answers to the most frequently asked questions we receive on drug testing.

Why should I care about drug testing?

The chance for you to be given a drug test is more probable now than ever before. Parents are being given home testing kits, police stations and community groups offer free or reduced-price testing clinics, some workplaces require it, and schools have been given the right to test a greater percentage of the student body. In fact, in June 2002, the Supreme Court approved random drug tests for public high school students who join competitive after-school activities and represent the school at various functions. So now, it's not just athletes who get tested...members of the debate team or students who sing in the chorus can be tested as well. This decision impacts the majority of middle and high school students. In fact, some states are now extending their tests to include using urine analysis to check for tobacco use from cigarettes and other tobacco products, like chewing tobacco. While some schools have been testing for tobacco for years, since the recent Supreme Court decision, more schools are testing for cotinine, the byproduct that remains in your system after using tobacco.

But beyond the fact that you are more likely to be tested, you should care about the results if you test positively for drug use. Your parent or guardian could punish you—keep you off the phone, off the computer and IM, and in the house with no access to the car. Perhaps you could get fired from your job or kicked off the team at school, or maybe even suspended or expelled. These actions could go on your record and hurt your chances of getting into college or obtaining a scholarship or financial aid. Ask yourself...is it really worth it?

How many different types of drug testing methods are out there?

There are several different types of tests given to detect drug use. If current drug use is suspected, often a blood or breath test is administered. If previous drug use is suspected, a urine or hair test may be used. These tests look for chemical metabolites, or traces, which the drug leaves behind after it is eliminated from the body. While hair tests are usually used as a secondary test or in cases of criminal offenses, there are a growing number of schools and employers who are using hair tests as opposed to urine tests. If the method is hair testing, then it is a lot easier for a nonuser to test positive, especially if the test subject is a person of color. Just walking through a room where there is marijuana smoke could result in a positive hair test. Coarser hair absorbs and maintains the tell-tale signs much better than fine hair.

The accuracy of a given drug test is determined by:

- The technology used in the test (accuracy varies considerably among types of tests).
- The nature of the individual drugs (which varies considerably from drug to drug).
- The skills and abilities of the testing organization.
- The procedures used to ensure proper handling and processing of samples.

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I've seen lots of ads for products that will "wipe my system clean"...do they work?

If you were to do a simple online search for information on drug testing, you will most likely find sites and companies that want to help you pass a drug test. However, there is nothing you can do or use to rid your body of marijuana traces. If you are worried about an upcoming drug test, don't bother with methods of "covering up" by drinking lots of fluids or taking some other remedies that you may hear of. These will actually dilute your urine, bringing you under more suspicion.

Think for a moment, what are these companies who push these miracle solutions really interested in? Are they your "friend" or are they just trying to make a few bucks off of scared teens? If you are about to be tested at home, school, or work, consider being honest about your behavior...and stopping your drug use.

How many days does it take until marijuana can no longer be detected in my system?

Marijuana can stay in your system for a few weeks, but it depends on a few factors, including the potency of the marijuana, how much you smoked, your body type and metabolism, how often you smoke, what time of day it was when you smoked, and the acidity of your urine (for urine tests). Even if you only took two hits, it could still show up on a drug test. Chemically speaking, THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, the active chemical in marijuana) is readily absorbed by fatty tissues in various organs. Generally, traces (metabolites) of THC can be detected by standard urine testing methods several days after a smoking session. However, in heavy, chronic users, traces can sometimes be detected for weeks after the use of marijuana has ceased.

When hair testing is used, traces of a drug can appear a week after drug use and can provide a 90-day history of use. Because marijuana collects in the hair at low levels (resulting in a fair amount of false negative results), these tests are usually administered when looking to detect use of cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, and PCP—which may only appear in urine tests for 2 to 5 days after use.

What about secondhand smoke or "passive inhalation"? Can being around others who smoke cause me to fail a drug test?

It depends on a few things. How strong was the marijuana, how close were you to it, how much smoke was in the room, and how recent was this? It also depends on the type of test being used. With passive inhalation, you won't have marijuana traces in your urine unless you were inhaling a great deal of secondhand smoke, and even that possibility is small. You can, however, have it show up in hair or skin tests. According to some studies, hair and skin tests can detect marijuana for a few months. The chance of receiving one of these two types of tests is less common, and it's usually done when there is a crime being investigated.

Many people claim passive inhalation of marijuana smoke as a reason for a positive urine test. While passive inhalation of marijuana smoke can be detected on this type of test, studies show that it is highly unlikely that a nonsmoking individual could inhale enough secondhand smoke to result in a positive urine test. So, in other words, if you fail a drug test and use "secondhand smoke" as your defense, it will be hard for anyone to believe that.

Now that I know about drug testing, what should I do?

The best bet is to keep yourself healthy by not smoking marijuana. If you don't smoke now, we encourage you to remain drug free. And if you have friends who smoke, be careful. Being around drugs or people who use drugs puts you at risk for trouble. If you are inhaling secondhand smoke, there are respiratory damage risks. If you are getting a ride from a friend who has been smoking or drinking, you could get hurt or even die from an accident. If you or someone you know is smoking marijuana, call the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse at (314) 962-3456 for information on resources near you that can help.

Source: National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information

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Resource from NCADA's RADAR library. For more information, visit our website at www.ncada-stl.org.
For questions on substance use, abuse and related problems, call NCADA's help Line at (314) 962-3456.