



Workplace alcohol and drug testing

Workplace alcohol and drug testing may seem like the perfect solution for employers concerned about the negative impact of workers' alcohol and drug use on organisational health, safety, productivity, reputation, and legislative compliance.

While testing may be useful it has limitations.

If implemented inappropriately, testing programs may fail to address risky alcohol and drug use and associated workplace consequences, and might contribute to increases in risky behaviour and workplace incidents.

What do alcohol and drug tests detect?

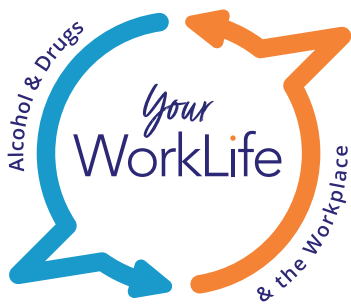
Alcohol and drug tests detect previous alcohol and/or drug use. A physical sample (e.g., breath, urine, hair, saliva, blood) from a worker is analysed to see if alcohol or drug metabolic by-products are present.

In most instances, workplace alcohol and drug testing programs will *not*:

- deter use
- detect impairment (only alcohol testing can detect impairment)
- assess hangover effects
- significantly improve workplace health and safety
- provide insight about how past drug use impacts workplace risk
- eliminate alcohol and drug issues at work.

While alcohol tests can identify impairment;
drug tests can only indicate previous use, not impairment.

When implemented as part of a comprehensive alcohol and drug policy response, testing can help improve knowledge about workplace alcohol- and drug-related risk and where to get assistance for risky or problematic alcohol and drug use.



How do alcohol and drug tests work?

All alcohol and drug tests require a 2 step screening and confirmation method. Workplace alcohol and drug testing programs also have to comply with Australian Standards where applicable.



Step 1 Screening

A sample is collected and screened using a 'point of collection' device. The accuracy of these devices may vary and 'false positive' readings may be returned.



Step 2 Confirmation

Drug tests require laboratory screening to confirm their accuracy.

For alcohol, a second breathalyser test is given at least 20 minutes after the first positive result to confirm initial BAC levels.

What Australian Standards apply?

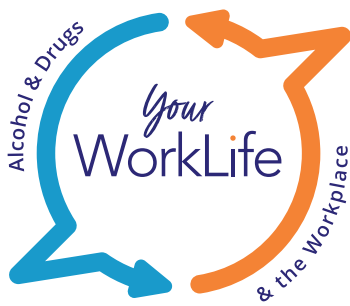
Several Standards have been developed to regulate alcohol and drug testing programs. The Standards detail:

1. procedures for collecting, storing, handling, and transporting samples (including chain of custody)
2. qualifications and training required for on-site collectors of specimens and laboratory staff
3. quality control management of on-site and laboratory testing devices and methods
4. cut-off points for positive on-site screening and confirmation results.

Alcohol breath analysis devices must comply with AS 3547:1997 Breath alcohol testing devices for personal use - https://infostore.saiglobal.com/en-au/Standards/AS-3547-1997-123042_SAIG_AS_AS_258442/.

Urine testing programs must comply with AS/NZS 4308:2008 - https://infostore.saiglobal.com/en-au/Standards/AS-NZS-4308-2008-116412_SAIG_AS_AS_276270/.

Oral fluids/saliva testing programs must comply with AS/NZS 4760: 2019 - https://infostore.saiglobal.com/en-au/Standards/AS-NZS-4760-2019-1144217_SAIG_AS_AS_2711498/.



Alcohol and drug testing methods

The following table lists the testing methods most commonly used in workplaces. The table over the page describes the different ways (approaches) testing can be used.

Test type	Testing for alcohol use	Testing for drug use		
Testing method	Breath	Urine	Saliva	Hair
Workplaces may implement a combination of testing methods	Positive test indicates impairment	<p>Detects drug use up to 3 days before testing</p> <p>With cannabis, occasional use can be detected for up to 6 days and more regular use can be detected for up to several weeks</p> <p>Unlikely to detect recent use (in the last 2 – 6 hours), therefore less likely to detect impairment</p>	<p>Short window for detecting recent use</p> <p>Use in the last 1-3 days can be detected for most drug types</p> <p>More likely to indicate impairment due to short window of detection</p>	<p>Detects drug use up to 6 months before testing</p> <p>Cannot detect recent use (past 1-4 weeks) or single use of drug</p> <p>Unlikely to show impairment</p>



Alcohol and drug testing approaches

Testing approach	Random	For cause	Post-incident	Pre-employment
Aim	Deterrence	Detection	Detection	Detection
Application	<p>Pre-determined proportion of the workforce is screened</p> <p>Conducted without notice</p>	<p>Targeted testing for workers suspected of alcohol and/or drug use</p>	<p>Workers involved in accidents or near-miss events</p>	<p>Job applicants screened as part of selection process</p>
Limitations	<p>Inefficient for detecting use as only a small proportion of occasional drug use is likely to be detected</p> <p>Ineffective at deterring use if target population believes they are unlikely to be caught</p> <p>Except for alcohol, does not demonstrate impairment</p>	<p>Workers' performance and/or impairment may not be alcohol and/or drug related</p> <p>Testing method may not be relevant for drug used (e.g., testing for alcohol when methamphetamine is used)</p> <p>Test technology may be unreliable</p> <p>Except for alcohol, does not demonstrate impairment</p>	<p>Testing method may not be relevant for drug used (e.g., testing for alcohol when methamphetamine is used)</p> <p>Test technology may be unreliable</p> <p>Except for alcohol, does not demonstrate impairment</p> <p>Does not establish causality between use and incident</p> <p>May lead to under-reporting of workplace minor incidents and near misses</p>	<p>Testing method may not be relevant for drug used (e.g., testing for alcohol when methamphetamine is used)</p> <p>Test technology may be unreliable</p> <p>Applicants can game the test as it is only conducted at one point in time and notice is given</p> <p>Only likely to detect forgetful, uninformed or severely addicted applicants</p>



How do I implement an alcohol and drug testing program?

Alcohol and drug testing programs should be implemented:

1. if a critical safety need has been identified (see [How-to-Guide: Assessing Workplace Alcohol and Drug Risk](#))
2. after you have consulted workers about:
 - your broader alcohol and drug policy
 - the selected method and approach
3. as one component of a comprehensive workplace alcohol and drug policy (see [Online Learning Topic 8: Alcohol and Drug Policies](#))
4. in compliance with industry-specific legislative requirements (e.g., Drug and Alcohol Management Plans (DAMPs) are required in mining, rail, road transport, and construction) (see [Fact Sheet: Legal Issues](#)) and applicable Australian Standards.

5 Principles of effective alcohol and drug testing programs

1 Consultative

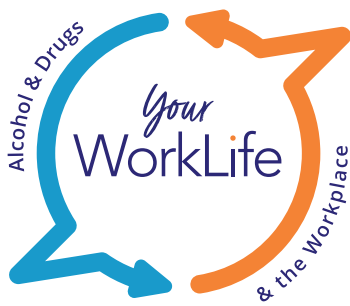
Effective alcohol and drug testing programs are developed in consultation with workers and underpinned by worker awareness, education and training programs. Consultation can occur in team meetings, surveys, toolbox meetings or workshop sessions (see [Online Learning Topic 8: Alcohol and Drug Policies](#) and [Topic 9: Alcohol and Drug Testing](#)).

2 Evidence-based

Effective alcohol and drug testing programs form part of your organisation's broader alcohol and drug or health and safety strategy (see [Online Learning Topic 8: Alcohol and Drug Policies](#)). This comprehensive strategy should have a wellbeing and safety focus and include a:

1. worker awareness program
2. manager, supervisor, and team leader education and training program
3. referral, treatment, and return to work program.

Testing will NOT reduce your workplace alcohol- and drug-related risk as a stand alone strategy. Regular discussions about your workplace expectations and policy, alcohol and drug risk, how to identify risk, and where to get help can reduce risky behaviours and improve wellbeing.



3 Appropriate

Effective alcohol and drug testing programs address workplace health and safety risk by confirming workers are:

1. not impaired by alcohol and/or drugs
2. fit for work
3. able to work in a safe environment

They are based on your workplace risk assessment (see [How-to-Guide: Assessing Workplace Alcohol and Drug Risk](#)) and consultation outcomes.

4 Fair

Effective alcohol and drug testing programs follow principles of procedural fairness and natural justice. In general, decision-makers are expected to:

1. provide workers with an opportunity to:
 - discuss positive workplace test results, or results from their independent sample if they differ
 - seek treatment and counselling and return to work (if appropriate)
 - present an argument about what disciplinary action should be taken in their individual circumstances
2. hear all the evidence and make their decision based upon the evidence presented without bias.

These are the same principles that apply in other workplace circumstances such as bullying and sexual harassment and should already form part of your standard disciplinary procedures.

5 Compliant

Effective alcohol and drug testing programs comply with:

1. workplace laws (health and safety, Fair Work, privacy and confidentiality, industry)
2. accepted Australian alcohol and drug testing standards and guidelines (e.g., AS/NZS 4308:2008 Procedures for specimen collection and the detection and quantification of drugs of abuse in urine)
3. public safety laws (e.g., Road Traffic Act 1961 (SA)).

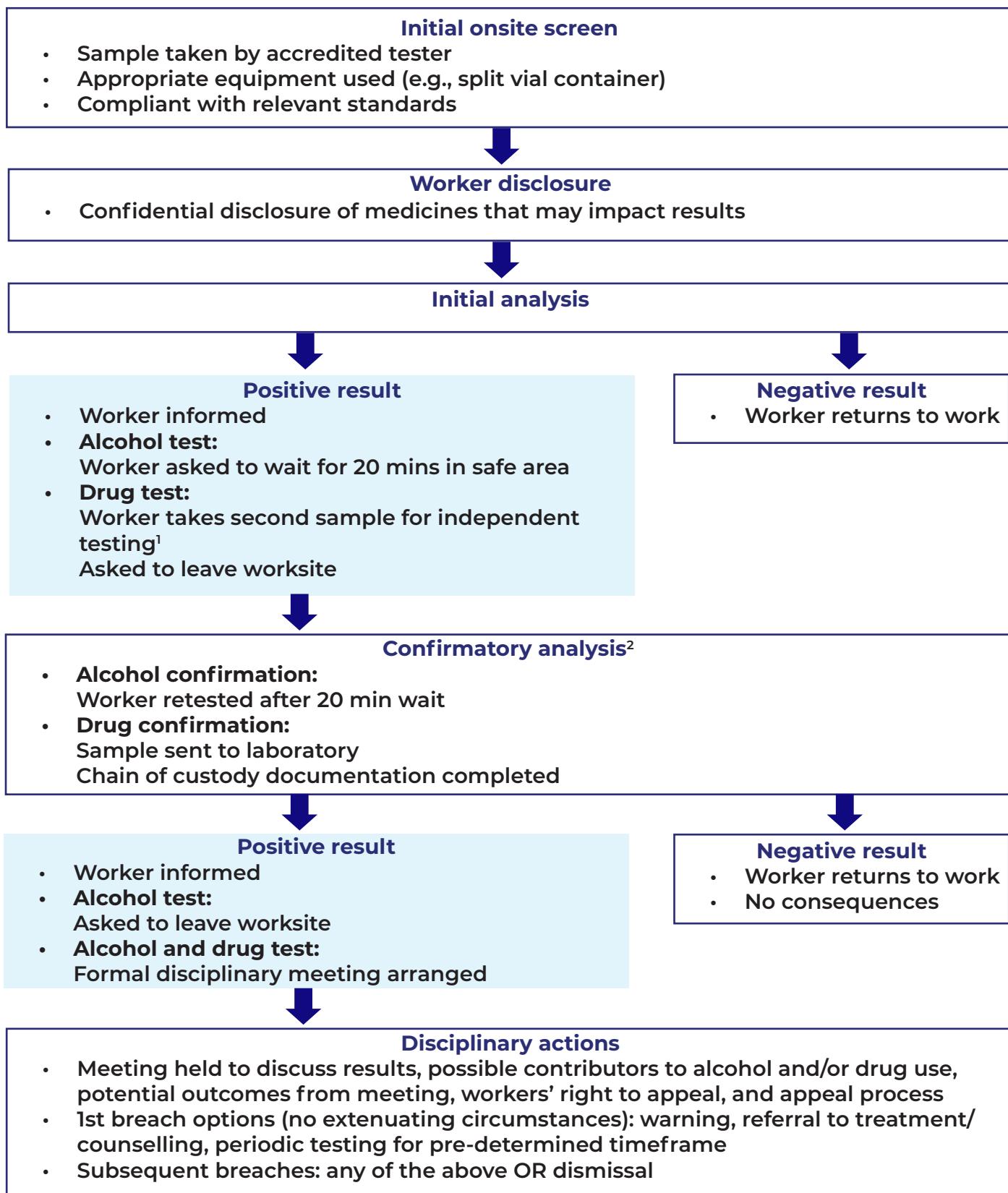
For more in-depth information about workplace alcohol and drug testing see [Online Learning Topic 9: Alcohol and Drug Testing](#).

Resources and handouts are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/external-site-resources>.

References are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/references>.



The Alcohol and Drug Testing Process Flow Chart



1. Workplace alcohol and drug policies should address what happens if results from independent analysis differ from the workplace results.

2. Your workplace alcohol and drug and/or disciplinary policies should address income and leave matters if workers are suspended from work while waiting for confirmation results and disciplinary meeting.