

# URINE TESTING VS. ORAL FLUID: THE PROS AND CONS

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When making decisions about workplace drug testing, one of the big choices is deciding what bodily fluid sample to test. One of the most longstanding test samples is the urine test. But, does longstanding always mean best? This article will explore the pros and cons of urine testing and compare those to the pros and cons of oral fluid testing.

## The CONS of urine testing

### Observed collections and cheating

One con to urine testing is the dilemma of the observed collection. Urinating is an extremely private matter and no one wants to be watched while doing it. However, total privacy during the collection of a urine sample opens the door to drug test cheating. When an individual has complete privacy to submit a urine sample, they can dilute the sample, add substances to it, use synthetic urine or use urine from another person. Collectors have methods to attempt to combat these tricks, but they are costly, time-consuming and are not fool proof. Employers also feel much more secure when acting on a positive drug test rather than on a diluted or potentially tampered test.

### Shy bladder

There are some individuals with a legitimate medical condition that makes it difficult for them to produce a urine sample on command, called "shy bladder" or paruresis. Paruresis affects about 7% of the population: about 20 million people in the United States, another 2 million in Canada, and countless other people, both men and women, worldwide. Additionally, there are some individuals seeking to skirt a urine test who claim the inability to urinate but have no medical reason for doing so. Handling such employee issues with respect is complicated, time-consuming and costly.

### Location of testing

Urine testing at the workplace is tricky, and more often than not, it is done at a collection site away from the workplace. While not impossible, organizing a location in the workplace where urine collection can be hygienic and free from tampering is complicated. Frequently, water sources are turned off, and dyes are used in toilets so that an employee cannot dilute their urine sample with outside water. Collectors need a place in close proximity to monitor for tampering and to collect the sample from the employee as quickly as possible.

At the same time, having employees travel to and from a collection site takes time and costs money, which can impact productivity.

### Historical drug use

Another con to urine testing is that, for some drugs, historical drug use is captured much more reliably than recent use. Marijuana is an example of one such substance. Marijuana use can show up on a urine screen for as long as 30 days after use. At the same time, urine screens can often miss marijuana that has been in the system for less than several hours. Due to the way that marijuana is metabolized, urine tests cannot accurately assess when a person last used marijuana. Thus, a positive marijuana test taken from a urine sample cannot tell an employer whether the individual used marijuana that morning or a week earlier. Additionally, a urine-based test can miss the most significant marijuana use: that of someone who used thirty minutes ago and is currently impaired.

## The PROS of urine testing

### Historical use

While historical use can often be a con to urine testing, it can also be a pro of this testing. If employers want to know if an individual has used drugs but are not concerned about when that use took place, urine is a great option. This is often the case with pre-employment testing, when employers are less worried about impairment on the job and more interested in the individual's background and lifestyle.

### Well-known, well-understood and widely available

Another big pro to urine testing is that it is well-known and well-understood by the public. People feel secure in the testing results and are familiar with the procedures. As a result, urine testing is more widely used and more widely available than oral fluid testing.

### Endorsed by DOT and SAMHSA

Since the beginning of federal government regulations on drug testing, urine testing has been authorized for use by the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Only very recently have any other samples been permitted for DOT-regulated employers or federal employees tested pursuant to SAMHSA guidelines. Even as oral fluid testing has been added to these regulations, urine testing remains and will likely always remain an authorized sample for federally-regulated employees.



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### The CONS of oral fluid testing

#### Not permitted in all states

Oral fluid testing has its own downsides as well. One con to oral fluid testing is that it is not currently permitted in all states. Maine, Vermont and Hawaii historically have not allowed oral fluid samples to be used in workplace drug testing, which leads us into our second con to oral fluid testing.

#### Newer methodology, not widely understood

Oral fluid testing is a newer methodology and uses newer technology than urine testing. This means that some individuals are not familiar with it and do not understand the procedures and science. Often, people may choose to stay with what they know rather than adopting new systems.

### The PROS of oral fluid testing

#### Ease and security of collection

A big pro to oral fluid testing is how easy it is to collect. Oral fluid testing utilizes a quick collection from the inside of the mouth. The privacy dilemma of urine collection is not an issue with oral fluid. Collectors do not need special accommodations to take samples on site as they do with urine collections, and employees do not need to travel to a special collection site. Additionally, because direct observation of the individual during the collection is simple and nonintrusive, it is nearly impossible to cheat an oral fluid test.

#### Short detection window

Another pro to oral fluid testing is that oral fluid testing has a quick detection window. Oral fluid can often detect substances nearly immediately post-use. In addition to this, oral fluid testing



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does not return a positive test for use that happened weeks before the test. Oral fluid testing will usually only return positive results for up to 2–3 days after use.

This short detection window can be very important when it comes to marijuana testing. As marijuana use, both medical and recreational, becomes more widespread, employers are increasingly pressed to identify only recent use of marijuana and not historical use. Some states even require employers to have a good faith belief that an employee has used marijuana recently before imposing workplace discipline. Oral fluid testing not only captures some recent use that urine tests cannot capture, such as use that occurs less than an hour before testing, but also eliminates the possibility that use occurred many days in the past. Thus, oral fluid testing gives an employer more accurate information about a time frame for marijuana use than does a urine test.

### Overall positivity rates

Additionally, lab-based oral fluid testing returns high rates of positive drug screens. Almost without exception, lab-based oral fluid reported higher positivity rates than lab-based urine testing<sup>1</sup>. Lab-based oral fluid tests seem to be catching positives that urine screens have missed.

### Endorsed by DOT and SAMHSA

Recently, both DOT and SAMHSA have endorsed lab-based oral fluid testing as a reliable form of workplace drug testing. Historically, only urine testing was permitted under federal testing programs, as mentioned above. However, in recent years lab-based oral fluid testing has been approved by the federal government as the only other federally endorsed method of workplace screening. This opens up the availability of lab-based oral fluid testing to millions of federally regulated employers, and also demonstrates how trusted and effective oral fluid testing truly is.

### Conclusion

Any sample choice for drug testing will have its strengths and its weaknesses. A nimble workplace policy can even utilize both sample types for different testing circumstances to take full advantage of the whole range of benefits. Employers should take time to evaluate, or reevaluate, the needs of their workplace when choosing a drug testing method. The safety and security of their business could depend on it.

1. Quest Diagnostic Drug Testing Index, 2022

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