

STERLING NEWS & NOTES

A Report from Sterling Reference Laboratories



First Quarter, 2008 – TECHNICAL CONTENT

Technical Information from STERLING Reference Laboratories

BEATING A DRUG TEST

Beating the drug test, is a game that is being played with increasing ingenuity as drug testing becomes a bigger part of peoples' daily lives. There are nearly as many strategies being employed to beat the tests, as there are reasons to interfere in the testing process. There has been a rapid proliferation of Internet web sites containing information about drug testing policies and procedures as well as advice on techniques and products that might help a drug user avoid detection. Unions and civil rights groups circulate information through trade journals and other publications. Probably the most active, if not always accurate, method of sharing information is the drug users' grapevine.

What Methods are being used?

Selling products designed to beat drug testing is an ever-expanding business. These products are of two general classes: those sold as cleansing or purification agents that are intended for consumption and those that are meant to be added directly to a specimen to cause interference in the testing processes. While it would be impossible to develop assays that could detect every conceivable adulterant product available, it is possible to use our knowledge of human physiology to include tests that will improve our ability to flag specimens that are potentially unreliable for monitoring drug use.

How do "flushing kits" work?

Most of the products on the market that are taken internally rely on the individual knowing when a test is scheduled. Although these products are very diverse in formulation, ranging from herbal teas such as Golden Seal to elaborate combinations of carbohydrates, gelatins and other substances, they all share common instructions for use. These instructions include avoiding "partying" or exposure to "toxins" for at least 48 hours and consuming the product with large amounts of water (up to a gallon) within a specified time period prior to giving the specimen. The goal of these products is to reduce drug levels below detection limits by a combination of abstinence and dilution. Creatinine and specific gravity measurements and random, unpredictable collection schedules are effective tools in combating this strategy.

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It is important to note that there is no component in any of the known products intended for internal use, including vinegar, pickle juice, bleach, vitamins, etc., that is capable of binding drugs, neutralizing them, or otherwise interfering in any of the testing processes in use at STERLING.

What about adding chemicals to the specimen?

There are a wide variety of substances that are introduced into a specimen, hoping to directly interfere with the testing process's ability to detect a drug. These include any cleaning products (cleansers, bleach, liquid hand soap, etc.) or other substances that are available in the collection room. Anything that is carried into a collection room such as perfume or cologne, Visine®, contact lens solutions; salt, sugar, etc. could be added to the specimen. Most commercially available adulterant products are sold in liquid or powder form in small vials that can easily be concealed. The amount of chemical added to the specimen is usually small enough that it won't significantly affect the temperature or appearance of the specimen. The list of potential adulterants is only limited by availability and the imagination or ingenuity of the donor. The most effective deterrents to avoid direct tampering with a specimen include: keeping the collection room clear of potential adulterants; not allowing coats, sweaters, purses, bags, children, etc. in the collection room; checking pocket contents; using temperature indicators on collection vessels; careful examination of the specimen; using observed collections; etc.

Will these products be detected in the testing process?

The drug screening assays in use at STERLING are fairly robust and are generally able to detect drugs even in the presence of foreign materials at moderate levels. These products can often be recognized by their unique result pattern. Some of these products may affect a specimen enough to be detectable by pH or other types of tests, but most will be detected by the unique manner in which they interfere with the testing processes. For instance, nitrite-containing products don't affect the screening assays, but interfere in a unique manner in the confirmation assays.

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What else should I be concerned about?

Dilution (excessive fluid intake, “flushing”, etc.) is still the most common method used to try to beat the test. This tactic is readily detected by paying attention to creatinine levels. Direct adulteration of the specimen is much less common, and is difficult to get away with in an observed collection. Specimen substitution is becoming more of an issue as the manufacturers of artificial urine are getting better at mimicking real urine. Again the best defense against this is use of observed collections and/or temperature strips. Some of the products on the market actually come with heat packs to help bring the temperature into an acceptable temperature range, so fake urines are often the most difficult problem specimens to identify.

As always, if you have any questions on interpretation, a consulting scientist is available at (800) 442-0438, (253) 552-1551, or via e-mail at certifying@regtox.com.