

A New Tool in the War on Drugs

By Adam Kreitman

A few swipes is all it takes. No needles. No yanking out strands of hair. No need to pee in a cup.

A new drug screening tool, DrugWipe, detects illegal narcotics not only on individuals but on the surfaces they touch.

DrugWipe is a hand-held device, resembling a home pregnancy test, that can detect the invisible drug residue produced by drug abusers and traffickers. It can be used to swipe down surfaces such as computers, phones and steering wheels. A companion device called PreScreen is used to swipe individuals by collecting sweat from the forehead or hands. The technology uses patented biosensor technology to detect the presence of Amphetamines (including Meth), Cocaine, Cannabis, and Opiates down to the nanogram level (billionths of a gram). Results are available in minutes and the appearance of a red line in DrugWipe's read out window indicates what type of drug(s), if any, are present.

The technology was developed by a German company, Securetec, in the mid-90s and is now marketed in the St. Louis area by Integrity Detection Systems. Originally used by law enforcement in Europe for traffic stops, it is now used in the United States by the FBI, DEA, US Customs, and over 2500 other federal agencies through the Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP) Technology Transfer Program. Before becoming a part of the Technology Transfer Program, the ONDCP put DrugWipe through extensive testing and found it to be 100% accurate.

Though it started out mainly as a tool for law enforcement, DrugWipe is now available for use in homes, businesses, and schools. Its increasing popularity is fueled by its strong deterrent effects, cost-effectiveness, and the ability to screen for illegal narcotics with little or no cooperation from those being tested.

In the home market, assessments are requested by parents concerned that their teenagers are involved with drugs. A positive result allows parents to confirm their suspicions before confronting their children. A negative result puts their minds at ease. Testing in the home also gives teens an excuse to stay away from drugs by saying, "I can't, my parents test me."

In businesses, companies are using DrugWipe assessments to limit the negative impact drugs have on safety and the bottom line. A surface assessment gives an accurate, real-time picture of the nature and scope of drug abuse and trafficking in the workplace. With this information, business owners can either develop a Drug-Free Workplace policy or modify an existing policy to target their resources to the actual problems, not perceived ones. Some ways in which companies are using DrugWipe include: auditing the effectiveness of existing drug testing procedures; establishing reasonable cause; plugging the gaps caused by existing laws and technologies; and linking data on drug use to internal data to see how it is impacting area such as employee productivity, absenteeism, and insurance costs.

School administrators are using DrugWipe to detect the patterns of drug abuse and trafficking in their schools. Once the patterns and types of drugs being used are determined, administrators can then implement drug education programs for the appropriate grades and also deter abuse and trafficking by students and faculty.

DrugWipe distinguishes itself in a few ways from traditional drug screening technologies such as blood, urine and hair testing. First, it screens for the raw drug instead of drug metabolites, making the test tamper-free. Also, by testing surfaces, DrugWipe has a much longer detection window than most other tests. Instead of having just a few days before drugs are passed through the body and are no longer detectable, drug residue lingers on surfaces for up to 8 weeks.

Additionally, it's non-invasive, sanitary, and provides accurate, legally defensible results within minutes without the need to submit samples to a lab.

There are issues to consider before using a device like this to carry out screenings in a home, business or school. Cross-contamination could be an issue in some circumstances and DrugWipe cannot differentiate between drug abusers and traffickers. Positive results should always be confirmed by using another method of drug testing before any action is taken. The individual tested should also be made aware of the results of all tests and be given a chance to challenge them.

Another issue is the "Big Brother" aspect of the DrugWipe. Many, especially employees, are uneasy with the thought of being tested without their knowledge. Since companies have the right to test their own property, there is nothing to prevent an employer from carrying out these tests when employees are not around. However, existing federal and state drug laws as well as collective bargaining agreements may dictate what, if any, action may be taken against individuals found to be using or dealing drugs through a surface assessment. Also, because of the strong deterrent effect of such testing, many employers want their employees to know about the testing and will incorporate it into their existing Drug-Free Workplace policies.

While there is unfortunately no magic wand that will wipe away the drug problems we face on a daily basis, DrugWipe is an effective new tool in the War On Drugs that definitely warrants attention.