

More American Workers Are Testing Positive for Drugs

More than one in 25 U.S. workers fail their employer's drug tests; marijuana is on the rise, according to Quest Diagnostics



Marijuana remains the most commonly used drug among U.S. workers and was identified in 2.5% of all urine tests for the general workforce in 2016, up from 2.4% a year earlier. Photo: AP

By

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More U.S. workers are testing positive for illicit drugs than at any time in the last 12 years, according to data coming out today from [Quest Diagnostics](#) Inc., one of the largest workplace-testing labs in the nation.

The number of workers who tested positive for marijuana rose by 4%, while positive results for other drugs also rose. The increases come against a backdrop of more liberal marijuana state laws and an apparent resurgence in the use of drugs like cocaine and methamphetamine.

In 2016, [4.2% of the 8.9 million urine drug tests that Quest conducted](#) on behalf of employers came back positive, up from 4% in 2015. It is the highest rate since 2004, when 4.5% of tests showed evidence of potentially illicit drug use.

[Marijuana remains](#) the most commonly used drug among U.S. workers and was identified in 2.5% of all urine tests for the general workforce in 2016, up from 2.4% a year earlier. Quest also tests people, such as bus drivers and airline pilots, in jobs that affect public safety. For these jobs, regular drug testing is mandated by federal rules. In this segment, 0.78% of workers tested positive for marijuana, up from 0.71% in the previous year.

Workers in states that permit recreational marijuana use appear to be picking up the habit. The number of workers testing positive in Colorado rose 11%; in Washington—9%. The rates of increase in these states, [the first to legalize pot](#), were more than double the increase nationwide in 2016.

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- [Legal Marijuana Poses Problems for Employee Drug Testing](#) (Nov. 22, 2016)
- [Regulator Warns Drug Use Rising Among Rail Workers](#) (Sept. 15, 2016)
- [Greater Share of U.S. Workers Testing Positive for Illicit Drugs](#) (Sept. 14, 2016)

In prior years, trends in those states tracked what was happening across the U.S.

Employers in Colorado and Washington can fire or choose not to hire someone who tests positive for marijuana despite the state laws. More recent statutes in states like Maine would give employers less leeway for [punishing workers with traces of pot](#) in their urine.

Drug use appears to be higher among the broader American population compared with just workers and job applicants subject to testing. In 2015, 6.5% of Americans ages 26 and older admitted [on a government survey](#) that they had used marijuana or hashish in the prior month, according to the National Institutes of Health's most recent analysis of drug use. Among those 18 to 25 years old, the share climbs to 19.8%.

Another concern for employers is the continuing rise in cocaine positives, particularly in drug tests conducted after workplace accidents. Of U.S. workers tested by Quest, traces of cocaine were found in 0.28% of tests. The share of positives from [postaccident tests](#) was more than twice as high as the rate from pre-employment assessments.



A marijuana plant in a greenhouse in Mendocino County, Calif. Photo: JOSH EDELSON/Getty Images

“While a test can’t tell you whether or not the use of cocaine is what caused that incident, it certainly raises the level of concern that cocaine may have had some impact,” said Barry Sample, senior director of science and technology for Quest’s employment-testing unit.

Amphetamine positives—which include Adderall, commonly prescribed for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder—rose for all workers to 1.1% of urine tests, up from 0.97% in 2015. Some positive results are later discarded if a worker produces a doctor’s prescription for a legal drug. Quest found that methamphetamine positives continue to climb in the general workforce, rising 64% between 2012 and 2016, amounting to an overall positivity rate of 0.18% for the general workforce last year.

One bright spot: The use of prescription opioids like oxycodone appears to be on the decline. In 2016, even heroin positives leveled off—a reversal of a previous pattern. In the past, heroin positives increased as law-enforcement agencies and regulators cracked down on illegal opioid prescriptions, Dr. Sample said.

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