



[Home](#) → [Medical Encyclopedia](#) → Breath alcohol test

URL of this page: //medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003632.htm

Breath alcohol test

A breath alcohol test determines how much alcohol is in your blood. It does this by measuring the amount of alcohol in the air you breathe out (exhale).

How the Test is Performed

There are many brands of breath alcohol tests. Each one uses a different method to test the level of alcohol in the breath. The machine may be electronic or manual.

One common tester is the balloon type. You blow up the balloon with one breath until it is full. You then release the air into a glass tube. The tube is filled with bands of yellow crystals. The bands in the tube change colors (from yellow to green), depending on the alcohol content. Carefully read the instructions before using the test to make sure you get an accurate result.

If an electronic alcohol meter is used, follow the instructions that come with the meter.

How to Prepare for the Test

Wait 15 minutes after drinking an alcoholic beverage and 1 minute after smoking before starting the test.

How the Test will Feel

There is no discomfort.

Why the Test is Performed

When you drink alcohol, the amount of alcohol in your blood goes up. This is called your blood-alcohol level.

When the amount of alcohol in the blood reaches 0.02% to 0.03%, you may feel a relaxing "high."

When that percentage reaches 0.05% to 0.10%, you have:

- Reduced muscle coordination
- A longer reaction time
- Impaired judgment and responses

Driving and operating machinery when you're "high" or drunk (intoxicated) is dangerous. A person with an alcohol level of 0.08% and above is considered legally drunk in most states. (Some states have lower levels than others.)

The alcohol content of exhaled air accurately reflects the alcohol content of your blood.

Normal Results

Normal is when the blood alcohol level is zero.

What Abnormal Results Mean

With the balloon method:

- 1 green band means that the blood-alcohol level is 0.05% or lower
- 2 green bands mean a level between 0.05% and 0.10%
- 3 green bands mean a level between 0.10% and 0.15%

Risks

There are no risks with a breath alcohol test.

Considerations

The test does not measure the driving abilities of a person. Driving abilities vary among people with the same blood-alcohol level. Some people with a level below 0.05% may not be able to safely drive. For people who only drink sometimes, judgment problems occur at a level of just 0.02%.

The breath alcohol test helps you to know how much alcohol it takes to raise the blood-alcohol level to a dangerous level. Each person's response to alcohol varies. The test may help you make better decisions about driving after drinking.

Alternative Names

Alcohol test - breath

References

Finnell JT. Alcohol-related disease. In: Walls RM, ed. *Rosen's Emergency Medicine: Concepts and Clinical Practice*. 10th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2023:chap 137.

O'Connor PG. Alcohol use disorders. In: Goldman L, Cooney KA, eds. *Goldman-Cecil Medicine*. 27th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2024:chap 364.

Review Date 4/3/2024

Updated by: Jesse Borke, MD, CPE, FAAEM, FACEP, Attending Physician at Kaiser Permanente, Orange County, CA. Also reviewed by David C. Dugdale, MD, Medical Director, Brenda Conaway, Editorial Director, and the A.D.A.M. Editorial team.

[Learn how to cite this page](#)



A.D.A.M., Inc. is accredited by URAC, for Health Content Provider (www.urac.org). URAC's [accreditation program](#) is an independent audit to verify that A.D.A.M. follows rigorous standards of quality and accountability. A.D.A.M. is among the first to achieve this important distinction for online health information and services. Learn more about A.D.A.M.'s [editorial policy](#), [editorial process](#), and [privacy policy](#).

Health Content
Provider
06/01/2028

The information provided herein should not be used during any medical emergency or for the diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. A licensed medical professional should be consulted for diagnosis and treatment of any and all medical conditions. Links to other sites are provided for information only – they do not constitute endorsements of those other sites. No warranty of any kind, either expressed or implied, is made as to the accuracy, reliability, timeliness, or correctness of any translations made by a third-party service of the information provided herein into any other language. © 1997-2025 A.D.A.M., a business unit of Ebix, Inc. Any duplication or distribution of the information contained herein is strictly prohibited.



National Library of Medicine 8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20894 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
National Institutes of Health