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Reports of workers swapping urine in drug tests surged sixfold last year as marijuana use grew



In this March 29, 2019, photo, a man smokes marijuana at a Spleef NYC canna-cocktail party in New York. Many employers in New York City could no longer require job applicants to be tested for marijuana use under legislation approved ... more >



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By Sean Salai - The Washington Times - Wednesday, May 15, 2024

The percentage of the general workforce who substituted other people's urine in drug tests surged sixfold to a new peak last year as legalized marijuana use grew nationwide, a report has found.

Drug testing laboratory Quest Diagnostics reported Wednesday that about 6,000 out of 5.5 million drug tests last year showed evidence of workers swapping urine. That's up by 633% from the 0.015% of urine tests with substituted samples in 2022 and is the highest rate in 30 years of data, the New Jersey company said.

Over the same period, Quest found invalid urine specimens that used large amounts of fluids to "conceal drug use" increased by 45.2%, to 25,000 tests in the general workforce.

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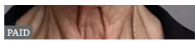
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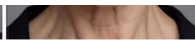
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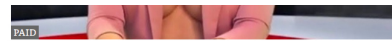
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Suhash Harwani, Quest's senior director of science for workforce health solutions, credited "our society's normalization of drug use" for driving a trend of workers ignoring office safety concerns.

"Given the growing acceptance and use of some drugs, particularly marijuana, it may be unsurprising that some people feel it necessary to try and cheat a drug test," Mr. Harwani said.

Quest also found that positive urine tests for tetrahydrocannabinol, the psychoactive substance in cannabis that produces hallucinations and nausea in higher doses, reached new peaks in preemployment screenings and post-accident workplace investigations.

Marijuana positivity in the general workforce jumped to a new peak of 4.5% of urine tests in 2023, up from 3.1% in 2019. Quest noted substantial annual increases for office workers in real estate, lending, education, public administration and professional, scientific and technical services.

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A record-high 7.5% of employees failed a urine test for marijuana following an accident last year, up from 7.3% of workers in 2022. (Besides preemployment drug screening, employers routinely conduct post-accident testing to evaluate whether drug use played a role in on-the-job injuries.)

Quest has tracked steady annual increases in people testing positive for marijuana after accidents since 2012 — a period coinciding with states legalizing recreational cannabis that began with Colorado and Washington that year.

Twenty-two other states, Guam and the District of Columbia have legalized marijuana for recreational and medical use since 2012, while 14 states have authorized it for medical use only.

Most recently, voters in Delaware and Ohio legalized recreational use last year.

The other states that have legalized recreational marijuana: Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Virginia.

Both recreational and medical uses of cannabis remain illegal under federal law, which classifies the drug with heroin and LSD.

However, the Biden administration recently announced plans to reclassify cannabis into a lesser category that includes steroids. That would ease restrictions nationwide and allow pharmaceutical companies to research marijuana.

From 2022 to 2023, Quest found the share of positive marijuana tests stayed the same in states where recreational marijuana was legal. It decreased by 2.2% in states that had only legalized medical marijuana and dropped by 6.7% in states where both uses remained illegal.

The Washington Times contacted several government authorities, including the Drug Enforcement Administration, for comment.

Several cannabis researchers and advocates not connected with the findings noted that office urine tests look for THC as evidence of intoxication, skewing the results.

"The reason people cheat on these tests is that THC can stay in your system for up to 30 days after ingesting a legal cannabis product," said Jerry Joyner, a Texas-based marijuana advocate who hosts the "Weed & Whiskey" podcast. "You can test positive but have no effects in your system whatsoever."

He urged employers to find "better methodologies" to assess whether workers are affected by marijuana use, and to limit urine tests to sensitive jobs or circumstances.

Others questioned the need for employers to administer urine tests as marijuana use becomes more widespread.

"Testing for marijuana makes less sense than testing for alcohol use at this point in history and companies should start reforming their practices accordingly," said Demetri Downing, founder of the Marijuana Industry Trade Association. "That being said, companies should always maintain the right to dismiss employees for behavior that jeopardizes their company."

Coleman Drake, a University of Pittsburgh public health professor who studies the impact of marijuana legalization, pointed to a February study in the Journal of the American Medical Association that associated recreational cannabis laws with a 10% surge in workplace injuries among employees aged 20 to 34.

"However, recreational cannabis laws are also associated with a decrease in nontraumatic injuries ... among older workers," Mr. Drake said. "So, what evidence we have suggests there are costs and benefits that differ by age."

Quest based its annual drug testing index report on de-identified urine, hair and oral-fluid drug test results recorded between January and December 2023.

The report found fraudulent drug tests also increased last year among federally mandated workers such as airline pilots, whose behavior could harm consumers as well as coworkers.

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Among these "safety-sensitive" workers, the share that substituted other people's urine in 2.8 million federally mandated drug tests jumped by 370.6% last year. In the same group, invalid urine tests adulterated with other fluids jumped by 36.7%.

"Cheating on drug tests not only undermines workplace safety but also jeopardizes the safety of society as a whole," Katie Mueller, a cannabis safety expert at the nonprofit National Safety Council, said in a statement on the findings.

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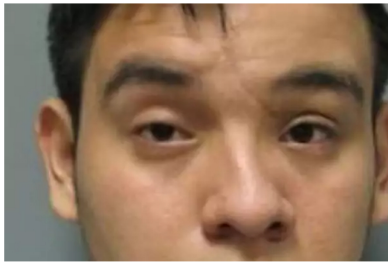
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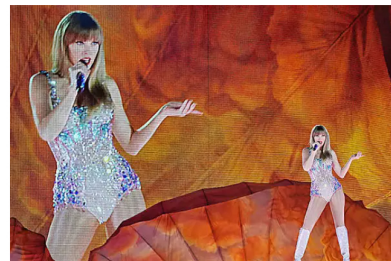
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