

Alcohol misuse in the UK: What the latest evidence means for family proceedings

Marie Law, Director of Toxicology at AlphaBiolabs, examines the most recent data on alcohol misuse in the UK, and the implications for alcohol testing in family proceedings



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Alcohol misuse remains a persistent and growing concern across the UK. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), 10,473 alcohol-specific deaths were registered in the UK in 2023, the highest number on record (ONS, *Alcohol-specific deaths in the UK: registered in 2023, February 2025*).

And data from the Children's Commissioner for England indicates that 478,000 children were living with an alcohol or drug dependent parent in 2019/20 (*Children's Commissioner for England, cited in Public Health England guidance, 2021*).

Where parental alcohol misuse is alleged or suspected, objective, court-admissible evidence is essential, and the testing options available are broader than many practitioners may realise.

The challenge for legal professionals

Alcohol misuse does not always present in ways that are immediately apparent. Functional dependency – where a person maintains daily responsibilities while consuming harmful levels of alcohol – can be difficult to identify through observation or self-disclosure alone.

Symptoms can also overlap with those of other conditions, including mental health disorders and prescription medication use, making clinical assessment alone an unreliable evidential basis for court proceedings, and reinforcing the value of scientifically robust, court-admissible laboratory testing in building an accurate evidential picture.

Understanding alcohol testing options

No single test provides a complete picture of an individual's alcohol use. The most effective strategies combine narrow-window and wide-window methods, selected according to the timeframe under consideration and the evidential requirements of the case.

Breath testing: Provides an immediate indication of current alcohol consumption. Best suited to confirming sobriety in real time – for example, prior to or during a contact session. *Detection window: real-time.*

Blood testing (PEth, CDT, LFT & MCV): Blood testing encompasses both direct and indirect markers of alcohol consumption.

Phosphatidylethanol (PEth) is a direct biomarker, meaning it can only be elevated as a result of drinking. Available via finger prick or venepuncture, it can detect consumption across a range of levels, from abstinence and social drinking through to chronic and excessive use, making it the gold standard for ongoing monitoring.

Carbohydrate Deficient Transferrin (CDT), Mean Corpuscular Volume (MCV) and Liver Function Tests (LFT) are indirect markers, each with differing detection windows. All three can be elevated by medical conditions unrelated to alcohol use, and should be considered alongside other evidence when interpreting results.

Detection windows: PEth, up to 4 weeks; CDT, up to 1 month; MCV, approximately 4 months; LFT, snapshot in time.

Hair alcohol testing: Testing head hair for the biomarkers Ethyl Glucuronide (EtG) and Ethyl Palmitate (EtPA) provides one

of the widest detection windows available. Samples can be analysed as an overview across the full period, or segmented month by month, enabling the court to identify patterns such as escalating use, periods of abstinence, or relapse. *Detection window: up to 12 months.*

Nail alcohol testing: Where head hair is unavailable, EtG testing using nail clippings offers a comparable alternative. Fingernail or toenail clippings can be collected but offer differing detection windows as they grow at different rates. *Detection windows: Fingernail clippings, up to 6-month overview; Toenail clippings, up to 12-month overview.*

SCRAM CAM®: The SCRAM ankle bracelet provides real-time, continuous monitoring by taking transdermal readings through the skin every 30 minutes. Particularly appropriate where a parent must demonstrate sustained compliance with a court order or abstinence condition. *Detection window: continuous, for as long as the device is worn.*

Accredited alcohol testing for legal matters

Selecting the most appropriate testing method, and ensuring results are expertly interpreted, is essential to supporting robust, evidence-led decisions in the best interests of vulnerable children and families.

AlphaBiolabs is a UKAS 17025-accredited laboratory (including Lab 51 extension for toxicology) with over 20 years' experience supporting family law professionals, social workers and local authorities with court-admissible alcohol testing, including bespoke testing schedules for repeat or ongoing monitoring cases.

To request a quote or discuss the requirements of your case, contact our New Enquiry team on 0333 600 1300, email testing@alphabiolabs.com, or complete our online quote form at <https://www.alphabiolabs.co.uk/legal-test-forms/>.

Marie Law, Director of Toxicology at AlphaBiolabs



A highly-skilled and respected scientist with over 15 years' experience in the field of forensics, Marie joined AlphaBiolabs in 2022 and oversees the company's growing toxicology team.

As Director of Toxicology, Marie's day-to-day responsibilities include maintaining the highest quality testing standards for toxicology and further enhancing AlphaBiolabs' drug and alcohol testing services for the workplace sector, members of the public, and the legal sector.

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