



# What You Need to Know About Standardized Field Sobriety Tests



# What Is a Standardized Field Sobriety Test?

The United States Department of Transportation (NHTSA) has determined that 3 field sobriety tests, when used together, are good indicators of driver impairment. These are known as standardized field sobriety tests ("SFSTs") and are described below.



# Standardization Is Critical.

These standardized field studies can be applied only when:

1. The tests are administered in a prescribed, standardized way;
2. The officer uses the standardized clues to assess the DUI suspect's performance on the test; and
3. The officer uses the standardized criteria to interpret the suspect's performance.

## The 3 SFSTs are:

1. Horizontal Gaze Nystagmus
2. Walk and Turn



# Horizontal Gaze Nystagmus (HGN) Test

**Nystagmus definition:** The rhythmic back and forth oscillation of the eyeball when the inner ear system or oculomotor control of the eye is disturbed.

**Horizontal gaze nystagmus (HGN)** is an involuntary jerking movement where the eye moves slowly in one direction and then returns rapidly. Since the eye bouncing does not affect vision, the person who exhibits HGN is not aware that it is happening.

Nystagmus will be present at high blood-alcohol concentration (BAC) levels.

Note: Conditions (e.g., wind or dust in the eyes or rotating strobe lights in the background) or medications may interfere with the test.

# Administration of the HGN Test

The suspect follows a stimulus with the eyes, and the police officer observes whether the eyes show some of the following clues of impairment:

1. Lack of smooth pursuit
2. Distinct nystagmus at a maximum deviation
3. Onset of nystagmus prior to 45 degrees

The test is administered with two passes, with a maximum of 6 clues possible. The officer must have a minimum of 4 clues to determine if the suspect has a BAC of 0.10 or above.



# Walk and Turn Test

This test can reveal 8 clues of impairment:

1. Suspect can't keep balance in the heel-to-toe stance. Swaying and using arms for balance does not count as a clue.
2. Suspect starts too soon (before the officer says, "Begin").
3. Suspect pauses for several seconds or stops walking.
4. Suspect misses the heel-to-toe when instructed to do so.
5. Suspect steps off the line entirely.
6. Suspect raises arms more than 6 inches while walking.
7. Suspect takes the wrong number of steps.
8. Suspect turns improperly.

If the suspect displays 2 or more clues, the suspect is classified as having a BAC of over 0.10.

# Administration of the Walk and Turn Test

Suspect stands heel-to-toe, with the arms at the sides, while the officer administers instructions. Then, the suspect must take 9 heel-to-toe steps along a straight line and turn in a prescribed manner, all while counting the steps aloud.

Note: The officer must administer the test over a designated straight line and over a reasonably dry, hard, level, non-slippery surface. Officer must take into account factors such as age over 65 and those with back, leg, or middle ear problems.



# One Leg Stand Test

This test reveals 4 clues of impairment:

1. Suspect sways side-to-side or back-to-front while balancing
2. Suspect raises arms more than 6 inches to balance
3. Suspect hops around
4. Suspect puts foot down

2 or more clues indicate that the subject has a 65% chance of having a BAC over 0.10.





# Administration of the One Leg Stand Test

Officer instructs the suspect to stand on one leg and extend the other leg to the front in a stiff-leg manner, holding the foot 6 inches above and parallel to the ground. Suspect must stare at the elevated foot and count out loud until told to stop.

Note: The test must last for 30 seconds, and the officer will tell the suspect when to stop.



# Summary

There are 3 standardized field sobriety tests approved by NHTSA:

1. Horizontal gaze nystagmus
2. Walk and turn test
3. One leg stand test

However, the number of clues required may be too low to differentiate sobriety from intoxication. There is a lack of scientific data to support the tests' reliability. NHTSA has not claimed that SFSTs are direct indicators of driving impairment.