



What You Need to Know About Non-Standardized Field Sobriety Tests



Why Do Police Use Non-Standardized Field Sobriety Tests?



An officer may administer a field sobriety test in order to determine whether:

- (1) There is probable cause for a stop and arrest;
- (2) You were physically or mentally impaired while driving; or
- (3) There is a causal relationship between alcohol and your driving behavior.

Commonly Used Non-Standardized Field Sobriety Tests



Romberg Test



A neurological test to detect an inability to maintain a steady standing position while the eyes are closed. The police officer asks subjects to stand with their feet together, hands at their side, head tilted back, and eyes closed. The officer will look for an actual loss of balance.

Problems with the Romberg Test

Increased body sway can be present for reasons unrelated to alcohol impairment (e.g., weight, age, physical condition, elevated temperatures).



Finger to Nose Test



Requires subjects to close their eyes and touch the tip of their nose with the tip of their index finger, alternating hands.



Problems with the Finger to Nose Test

This can only reflect the presence of alcohol in the subject's system instead of predicting the level of alcohol impairment.

Alphabet, Counting Down, and Finger Counting Tests



Requires subjects to do one of the following, sometimes while standing with one foot in front of the other in heel-to-toe position:

- (1) Recite or write down parts or all of the alphabet;
- (2) Count aloud numbers in reverse; or
- (3) Touch the tip of the thumb to each finger on the same hand in a particular order while counting.

Problems with the Alphabet, Counting Down Tests



NHTSA warns that these techniques are not reliable and do not replace the standardized field sobriety tests.

Note: The officer should not require the subject to recite the alphabet backwards.

Handwriting and Tracing Tests

Comparing handwriting samples taken at various stages.



Problem with the Handwriting and Tracing Tests



None of the changes in handwriting alone can account for the effects of alcohol.

Hand-Pat Test

Subject is asked to place one hand palm up and in front, and the other hand is placed on that hand with the palm down. Top hand pats the bottom hand and rotates 180 degrees to pat the bottom hand with the back of the top hand. Subject must keep doing this until told to stop, and he or she must increase the speed of rotation.



Problem with the Hand-Pat Test



It is not scientifically proven to be an accurate prediction of sobriety, and it is easy for even a sober person to mess up the test as the speed increases.

Conclusion



Since the police officer's goal is to collect "objective" evidence of your intoxication or sobriety, the best test for driving impairment remains the blood alcohol test (and not the non-standardized field sobriety tests).