

# Clinical Guidance for Monitoring and Accountability in Safety-Sensitive Workers with a History of Substance-related Disorders

## Research Focus

Despite a legal framework for random testing, no national standard exists in Canada to guide how monitoring and accountability programs should be designed, implemented, or evaluated for workers returning to safety-sensitive/decision-critical roles after treatment for substance use disorders. This article fills that gap by examining the clinical and policy guidance related to monitoring and accountability for these workers.

This article views monitoring as a recovery-support and risk-mitigation mechanism that balances worker rights, employer obligations and overall safety. It aligns to CoRE's work related to recovery and occupational safety in high-risk sectors such as healthcare, construction, energy, transportation, and natural resources.

## Research Overview

This article, a narrative clinical review, is informed by occupational medicine, Canadian legal frameworks, and international evidence from safety-sensitive programs like physician health and aviation monitoring programs. The authors used peer-reviewed literature, Supreme Court decisions, professional guidelines, and clinical experience in monitoring substance-related disorders to inform the findings. It outlines core principles and components of effective monitoring programs, including biological (toxicology) testing, behavioral observation, overall health, and program ethics. It's intended for use by employers, unions, clinicians, regulators, and monitoring agencies operating within Canadian human rights and privacy law.

## Key Findings

- Substance-related impairment poses a significant risk, particularly in safety-sensitive and decision-critical roles where even subtle impairment can lead to serious harm.
- Independent, randomized, individualized, and justified testing is legal in Canada for safety-sensitive workers returning from treatment for substance use disorders.
- Effective return to work programs include biological, behavioural, and overall individual health monitoring.
- Monitoring programs must clearly define roles and responsibilities and separate therapeutic care from forensic monitoring.

## CoRE Insights

- 1 **Monitoring is a recovery-support tool** that, when designed properly, can promote sustained remission, a safe return to work and help detect early relapse.
- 2 **Individualized evidence-based monitoring is essential** and should be tailored to the severity of the condition, occupational risk, and recovery history of an individual. Approaches that are too rigid or permissive can increase risk.
- 3 **Independent oversight and clear separation between treatment and monitoring** protects workers and employers by reducing ethical conflicts and improving legal and regulatory requirements.
- 4 **Safety-sensitive work requires a higher standard of monitoring and accountability** because even a subtle impairment can have life-threatening consequences.
- 5 **Iterative programs are crucial** and should be responsive with regular opportunities to re-evaluate based on the worker's condition, needs and recovery trajectory.

# Key Findings Con't

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- The frequency and duration of testing should be individualized, with most frequent testing in the first one to two years and reassessed over time. Clinical practice supports monitoring from two to five years, depending on risk.
- Use of multiple testing methods — urine, oral fluid, blood tests, hair and nail — improve detection and reduce risk of false negatives, particularly for substances with short detection windows.
- Adherence challenges are an early warning sign and should trigger timely intervention and care, not automatic disciplinary action.
- Ethical implementation of monitoring programs requires balancing autonomy, client outcomes, non-maleficence, and justice, with strict adherence to privacy and confidentiality.

## How to Take Action

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### For Employers and Clinicians

- Develop clear, recovery-oriented monitoring programs for safety-sensitive workers that align with Canadian human rights and labour law.
- Treat monitoring as part of a continuum of care and risk mitigation, rather than a stand-alone compliance requirement.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all models and allow for structured, individualized care based on occupational risk, condition severity, and the recovery trajectory.
- Use independent monitoring providers to administer testing and oversight to maintain separation from treatment providers and workplace management.
- Ensure monitoring programs are transparent, balanced, and clearly communicated, with strict privacy and information-sharing protocols.
- Integrate mutual support and recovery activities as core components of long-term support.
- Reassess monitoring regularly and flexibly, rather than relying on fixed timelines.

## Links to Research Materials

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[Clinical Guidance for Monitoring and Accountability in Safety-Sensitive Workers with a History of Substance-related Disorders](#)

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