

Idaho Statesman

Nancy Cladis of Idaho Monitoring Services explains how SCRAM monitors detect alcohol in your body. [Katy Moeller kmoeller@idahostatesman.com](mailto:kmoeller@idahostatesman.com)

February 14, 2018

When you drink alcohol, your liver is tasked with breaking it down — but not all of it.

Some of it is expelled through breathing and urination. A tiny amount, about 1 percent, is excreted through the skin.

Your sweat doesn't lie.

SCRAM bracelets, typically worn on the ankle, test wearers' sweat around the clock to determine if they've been drinking.

"The easiest way to think about it is: You have a breathalyzer strapped to your leg that's testing you every 30 minutes, 24 hours a day," said Nancy Cladis of Idaho Monitoring Services, which is contracted to provide and manage alcohol-monitoring and GPS devices for Ada County.

Idaho Monitoring Services has 80 to 100 SCRAM bracelets in use for the Ada County program at any given time — about double the number that were in use in 2008 but still a small percentage of defendants.

Last year, 178 people on pre-trial release in Ada County wore them for a combined total of 11,222 days; there were 59 violations. Also, 116 people who were on misdemeanor probation wore them for a combined 7,667 days; there were 86 violations.

So what's limiting wider use of the ankle monitors? The simple answer: Defendants have to want to wear them and cover the cost.

Pre-trial defendants can opt to stay in jail rather than agree to conditions of release, said Judge Melissa Moody, administrative district judge for the Fourth Judicial District.

"As a practical matter, folks want to get out but they may not be able to afford to get out if the judge puts the requirement of a SCRAM bracelet," Moody said, noting that the added cost on top of posting bond is more than many can afford. "\$285 a month. That's a really big consideration, and judges are aware of that."

Moody said she believes the SCRAM bracelets are an effective tool for monitoring and keeping people on track. She's even heard that from defendants themselves.



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“They told me, ‘Judge, downloading every single day, multiple times a day. I just felt like someone is always watching me,’” Moody said.

But it’s not a cure-all, she said. For example, it won’t stop someone from getting drunk and then driving, in the way that an ignition interlock device will prevent DUI driving (drivers must blow into the device before the car will start).

Devices can save jail space, taxpayer money

Wearable alcohol-monitoring devices have been around more than a dozen years. They’ve garnered national attention over the years, thanks to celebrities who have worn them after run-ins with the law, including Lindsay Lohan, Tracy Morgan, Andy Dick, Nicole Richie and Eve.

In Ada County, the devices are used to closely monitor defendants on pre-trial release and those out on parole or probation. They are targeted primarily at those considered moderate or high risk for drinking, violating terms of their release, Cladis said.

The monitors are one way to free up beds at the crowded jail while also protecting the community, said Ada County Sheriff’s spokesman Patrick Orr. They are also a cost savings for taxpayers.

The cost of housing someone at the Ada County Jail for one day: about \$90. The cost of SCRAM bracelets is \$9.50 a day, or about \$285 a month — and the wearers pay that.

When defendants or probationers balk at the cost, Cladis has a pointed response: “How much do you spend a day on alcohol?”

The traditional, most common method of monitoring for alcohol and/or illicit drug use is urinalysis, or testing of urine samples. Those are often referred to as a “UA.”

Those tests cost about \$12.50 per test, and it requires defendants to go to specified locations one or more times a week to provide samples. It provides snapshots but not a clear picture of whether a person is staying sober.

“Someone who is just subject to urinalysis, they could consume alcohol between their UAs and it might not be noticed,” said Ada County Deputy Prosecutor Tamera Kelly, who oversees the magistrate unit that prosecutes all misdemeanor DUIs.

Remote breathalyzers also now in use

Canyon County Probation contracts with Sentinel Offender Services for its alcohol-monitoring system, called BART.

They aren’t using ankle monitors. But they do have 30 to 40 people who are using remote breathalyzers, said Canyon County spokesman Joe Decker. Users blow into the devices — and a camera takes their photo to ensure no one else is blowing for the person — and the test results are transmitted to authorities.

Those cost \$8 per day, and the users cover that cost.

“The reason more aren’t in use is because it’s an offender pay situation, and a lot of the offenders can’t afford that,” Decker said.

Ada County also uses the remote breathalyzers; about 40 of those are in use at any given time. The cost to wearers is slightly less than the SCRAM bracelets: \$7.50 a day.

While Ada County has been using alcohol-monitoring bracelets for more than a dozen years, the Idaho Department of Correction has used them for about three years.

There are one to five probationers or parolees using these devices (TAD bracelets and Soberlink breathalyzers) at any given time, according to Jeff Ray, a spokesman for the Department of Correction.

“This is due to budget and cost,” Ray said. “Unless ordered otherwise by the jurisdictional authority, they are intended to be used as an intermediate sanction and utilized for short periods of time with demonstrated compliance.”

SCRAM bracelets distracting?

The SCRAM monitors weigh just under 6 ounces. Once they are “installed,” they are not removed, even in the shower. They test for alcohol every 30 minutes, around the clock, vibrating a little bit during each test.

Isn’t that a distraction? Most only notice it when they’re going to bed, said Scott Nelson, who works with Cladis.

“People get used to it,” he said. “They don’t like it the first couple days, and then they don’t complain.”

The data collected by the monitors throughout the day is downloaded to a base station (kept in the person’s home or at work). Once the device is synced up with the base station, the data is available to Idaho Monitoring System and county officials — who check the results daily, or more often if needed.

“Once the data comes in, it plots out on a graph,” Cladis said. “It shows when they started drinking, the peak and when they sobered up.”

The SCRAM bracelets do not have GPS capability. So if an offender is being monitored for alcohol use and is also restricted from going to certain places, he or she might have devices strapped to both ankles. That’s not common, Cladis said, but it is done. The remote breathalyzers provide location information.

The alcohol monitors are a constant reminder to wearers, and that seems to help with compliance, Cladis and Nelson said.

The devices send a notification if they are tampered with, as if someone tries to put something between their skin and the sensor on the monitor. There’s an alert sent if they are cut off or otherwise removed.

“It’s successful because the offenders know they can’t drink without getting caught,” Cladis said.

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