

# Tag that sends wearer straight from tequila to the slammer



Our reporter ensuring a thorough test of the SCRAM alcohol monitoring tag, which is already in use for 900 offenders  
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

It took 23 minutes for my three tequila shots to start flagging up on a centralised computer linked to my ankle tag that was monitoring my alcohol intake.

Another half an hour and a pint of 4.5 per cent ale later and I was already well over the drink-drive limit.

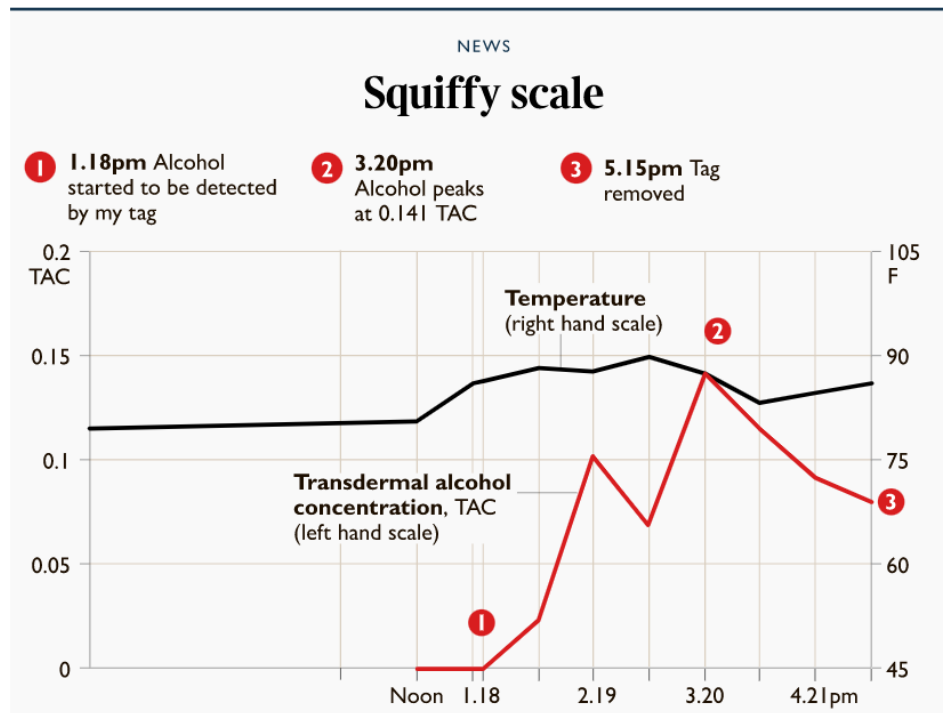
Luckily for me, the sobriety tag that was attached to my right ankle was not alerting the police or probation service to my drinking session at lunchtime on a Thursday.

But had I been one of the 900 convicted criminals who are ordered to [wear a sobriety tag](#) at present, I would barely have been able to finish my lunch before the authorities picked me up for breaching the conditions of my community order or licence conditions.

After happily finishing my lunch of Hunter's Chicken and a second pint of Ice Breaker Pale Ale without any interruption from the authorities, I returned to the Ministry of Justice to be shown first-hand how the probation service track those ordered to wear a sobriety tag.

The tag told us that my intoxication had peaked at 3.20pm, about half an hour after I had finished my “drinking session” of about eight units of alcohol, putting me three times over the drink-driving limit.

The food had helped to soak up some of the alcohol and showed up as a dip on the graph at about 2.20pm, which was about half an hour after I had stopped eating. But it only helped push the black line, which tracks what is called the transdermal alcohol concentration (TAC), downwards, rather than hiding the alcohol altogether. It jumped back up as the effect of eating wore off.



This is because the tag is monitoring the alcohol intake by measuring the wearer’s perspiration. About 1 per cent of alcohol consumption exits the body through the skin and can be detected by testing sweat, known as transdermal testing.

Within 23 minutes of my first tequila shot, alcohol was being detected by the tag around my ankle because it was beginning to leave my body through “insensible” sweat, which means it is invisible to the naked eye.

The tag itself monitors the sweat constantly, and feeds data back to a “base-station” device that is installed in the wearer’s home, which forwards the information to a central database every 30 minutes.

That is used by the police or probation service to monitor whether the wearer is complying with particular requirements or conditions.

Since the sobriety tags were introduced in October 2020, they have been worn by more than 3,600 offenders handed alcohol monitoring orders or as a licence condition for prison leavers.

The Ministry of Justice has set a target of 12,000 offenders to be fitted with the alcohol monitoring tags by 2025.

Judges can order an offender given a community sentence to be fitted with a sobriety tag if the crime they committed was related to alcohol, and the wearer must remain sober throughout or be in breach of their order and would face a custodial sentence. There is more flexibility for probation officers when deciding whether an offender leaving prison should wear a sobriety tag. They can order a prison leaver to wear a tag if they believe alcohol could trigger further offending but the original offence need not be alcohol-related.

Prison leavers are tagged for a minimum of 30 days but can be ordered to wear the device for up to a year, and the period can be extended if their probation officer deems it necessary.

Unlike community orders, prison leavers fitted with tags will not automatically be banned from drinking. Instead, probation staff will tailor permitted consumption to the offender's individual circumstances, which may mean they are given a curfew or banned from drinking while seeing their children over a particular weekend, for example.



The device can detect alcohol in the body by monitoring sweat  
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The tags can also be used on prison leavers with an alcohol addiction in order to help them wean themselves off booze when a complete ban would damage their recovery.

While the tags can be removed with a specific tool, anything that is detected between the ankle and the device registers an alert within 30 minutes to the central monitoring system. Removing the tag would be considered a breach of the licensing conditions or community order and the offender could be recalled to prison or court.

Tampering with the device may also be considered a breach.

Ministry of Justice analysis of offenders who have worn tags since they were introduced has shown a high sobriety rate. Offenders have remained sober on 97 per cent of the days on which they were worn.

Having a sobriety tag wrapped around my right leg for a day was annoying. It rubbed against my leg and itched slightly, and had I been forced to wear it for more than a few days I would have hated the effect it would have had on my ability to run or play football.

But I was told by those who have worn the tags that you get used to the feeling and after a while it becomes second nature. An alcoholic who was forced to wear one said he missed it after it was removed, because he found himself too easily reaching for the bottle now nobody was monitoring him.

The tags were developed by SCRAM Systems, a US company that was founded by two men affected by alcohol-related tragedies. Jeff Hawthorne, who died in 2014, invented the technology from his garage after a friend from university was killed by a drink-driver with repeated convictions. His co-founder, Mike Iiams, was motivated by the abusive behaviour of what he has described as his “skid row” drunk grandfather who eventually went sober and lived to almost 100.

SCRAM has more than 50,000 electronic tags in use at any given time, half of which are sobriety tags.



Matt Dathan found the device itchy and annoying but those who have worn it longer say the feeling soon becomes second-nature

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The company's devices are used not only on offenders but by family courts to wean parents off alcohol and reunite them with their children and partners.

Arthur, 37, from Swansea, who was ordered to wear an alcohol tag as part of a community sentence for malicious communication in January last year, said it had helped turn around his "chaotic" life. He said: "Being sober for six months helped me keep all my emotions in check. I thought clearly. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me. The tag helped me realise that tomorrow would always be worse if I drank today with emotions running high."

The jury is still out on their longer-term success in the UK and the introduction of other types of tag, such as GPS monitoring devices, has led to costly failures.

A report by the National Audit Office this year found that criminals fitted with GPS tags, which have recently been extended to burglars, robbers and thieves, could not be tracked in real time, after ministers wasted £98 million on a contract with Capita.

The watchdog also found that the "poor quality" of the case management system meant the prison and probation service could not determine whether tagging prison leavers was helping to prevent them from returning to jail.

A separate report by David Neal, chief inspector of borders and immigration, raised questions about the recent use of GPS tags for foreign national offenders. His report, published in July, found that foreign criminals had been able to breach their conditions repeatedly without receiving any "appropriate sanction" beyond warning letters.

However, Dominic Raab, the justice secretary, and the Ministry of Justice more widely, are confident that the high rate of sobriety recorded in the first 20 months of the alcohol monitoring tags indicates that they will be a "gamechanger" in altering the behaviour of criminals whose offending is influenced or linked to alcohol.

Statements from both Conservative leadership contenders suggest tagging will remain a priority under the next prime minister. The Ministry of Justice is launching an £18.5 million innovation fund to discover the "next generation" of tags, which may include gyroscopic devices that will catch drink-drivers and speeders who breach driving bans.

Setting out his ambitions for expanding the use of sobriety tags, Raab said: "We're more than trebling the number of offenders on these tags by 2025 because they work. Offenders stick to the terms of their alcohol monitoring conditions 97 per cent of the time while they're wearing them.

"As alcohol plays a part in more than a third of all violent crime, and 20 per cent of people on probation have a drinking problem, this will not only help to make our streets significantly safer but also give offenders the push they need to turn their lives around."

Amit Sethi, director of SCRAM's European operations, said: "We are thrilled that the Ministry of Justice have made SCRAM continuous alcohol monitoring tags available across England and Wales to offenders going through the courts system, probation and those exiting prisons. We feel that our alcohol tags are a valuable tool that help the criminal justice system to directly address alcohol-related crime and assist in improving the lives of both offenders and the wider public."