

The Seinfeld Defense: Poppy Seed Consumption May Actually Cause Drug Test Failure

Insights

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Elaine Benes loved poppy seed muffins. That is, until she failed a drug test at work for opium. That's right. As Peterman said, "White Lotus. Yam-yam. Shanghai-Sally." Elaine did not lose her job, but she was not allowed to accompany Peterman on his trip to Africa.

This iconic *Seinfeld* episode led many to wonder whether eating too many poppy seeds could actually affect someone's drug test and result in a false-positive for opioid use. A 2003 peer-reviewed scientific study confirmed the *Seinfeld* thesis, finding that eating poppy seeds could be detectable on some drug tests.

A recent incident reported by the *Washington Post* reveals that poppy seed false positives can occur in the real world as well. As the *Post* reported, a woman ate a poppy seed bagel (which is well-known to be superior to a poppy seed muffin) the morning she went into labor, and she later tested positive for opiates. The false-positive resulted in her daughter having to stay in the hospital for several days for monitoring.

Could this affect work place drug testing? Can an employee assert the *Seinfeld* Defense?

Not likely. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in 1998 raised the recommended level needed to test positive for opiates from 300 ng/mL to 2000 ng/mL. As reported by the *Post*, one would need to eat more than three large poppy seed bagels to fail under the higher level. The woman in the *Post* story failed because some hospitals, including hers, did not adopt the higher test levels.

While a false-positive drug test for eating too many poppy seeds seems far-fetched, companies with drug testing programs should be reminded that it is a remote—a very remote—possibility, especially if the test they use has a lower threshold for a positive opiate result. And if an employee claims the *Seinfeld* Defense, they may also be familiar with another bit of the show's wisdom: "Jerry, just remember, it's not a lie if you believe it."

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