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NIA VAKDALOS BY DAN MACMEDAN, USA TODAY

## HEALTH

# An anti-DUI device you carry in your pocket

As the personal breath testers get more popular, science looks at whether they can really change behaviors

Karen Weintraub  
Special for USA TODAY

Rachel De La Montanya is still haunted by that day seven years ago when she stopped on her way home from work to have a drink with friends.

They met around 5 p.m. She drank two glasses of red wine and pulled out of the parking lot three hours later. Almost immediately, she saw flashing lights in her rear-view mirror. Though she assumed she'd been drinking responsibly, the police breathalyzer showed her blood alcohol level at .09 — above the legal limit of .08.

Ever since, the Mill Valley, Calif., hair stylist, 40, has carried a personal breathalyzer device with her when she goes out with friends. She won't get behind the wheel, she says, unless her blood alcohol level is .03 or less.

"I don't want to be at even half-way the legal limit," says De La Montanya, who adds that she has only a few drinks a few times a month and doesn't want to risk another DUI. "It was expensive and humiliating and horrible."

Such personal breathalyzer tests are becoming increasingly popular, companies say, as the devices get smaller, cheaper and more reliable.

Scientists are just beginning to explore whether the devices are effective at stopping people from drinking and driving. But anecdotally, users say the testers help them make better choices and stay better informed about their bodies.

Two companies, BACtrack and Vertisense, which sells the Alcohol line of mobile alcohol trackers, say they have essentially two types of customers: those like De



BACTRACK

La Montanya who have had a problem with alcohol and driving, and those who are just curious.

Clint Atkinson, 31, a booking agent from San Diego, says he bought a BACtrack device 18 months ago to keep better tabs on his blood alcohol level. Though he doesn't have a problem with alcohol, he says, he trusts a personal device better than the rule-of-thumb that it's OK to have one to two drinks an hour.

The devices, which often consist of a mouthpiece connected via Bluetooth to a smartphone app, work by measuring the alcohol level in the breath. The ones with fuel cells — which cost about \$100 — are now roughly equivalent to police breathalyzers, company data show.

Drinkers are supposed to wait 15 minutes and sip water before testing so they get a true measure of the alcohol in their bloodstream.

The devices can help drinkers know when they've had too much to make good decisions, says Robert Voas, a senior scientist with the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, a non-profit company. People are notoriously terrible at judging their blood al-

cohol level, he says.

But, says Voas, who has studied alcohol use for four decades, "you have to be careful not to use it as an excuse for having another drink."

Women get drunk faster than men because fat — which women generally have more of — doesn't absorb alcohol, he says. Weight also affects blood alcohol level, as does food eaten before or while drinking. Coffee, he warns, does not help: "It (only) makes you a wide-awake drunk rather than an asleep one."

And one study has demonstrated that people often choose to drink and drive even if they know their blood alcohol limit is close to or over the limit, he says.

"One of the features of alcohol is it makes you feel smarter, more confident, more ready," Voas says.

Robert Leeman, an associate professor at the University of Florida, is preparing to launch a study looking at whether college students will drink less if they have a personal breathalyzer in their pocket.

Alcohol provides the best "buzz" with the least morning-after effects at a blood alcohol level of about .05, he says. He's curious

about whether people will change their drinking habits if they know that and have the means to measure it.

Andrew Isaac, 30, of Clover City, Calif., is among the "curious" users. He won't drive if he's had anything more than a few sips, he says, but he likes to know how alcohol affects him. So a couple of times a month when he's out drinking with friends, he pulls out his BACtrack device.

"The thing I like about it is you can guess beforehand," he says, adding that he's pretty good at predicting. "I'm usually within .01."

Isaac says he was in a bar a few weeks ago when the woman next to him noticed him using his breathalyzer device and asked if she could give it a try.

She was the designated driver for a group of friends, but her reading showed she had a blood alcohol level of .12, substantially above the legal limit.

She and her friends took an Uber instead of driving, Isaac says — which made him feel good about carrying the device: "It actually prevented a completely random person from drinking and driving."

BACtrack employee Shawn Casey demonstrates the company's personal breathalyzer device. The technology is getting less expensive and more reliable.