



Lohan's Alcohol-Detection Bracelet: A Dud?

Before her most recent alcohol-related arrest, starlet Lindsay Lohan was wearing an alcohol monitor to prove her sobriety. The device's creators explain what may have gone wrong.

WEB EXCLUSIVE

By Alexandra Gekas

Newsweek

Updated: 12:10 p.m. CT July 27, 2007

July 27, 2007 - It wasn't supposed to be this way. When Lindsay Lohan left a *voluntary* 45-day stint in rehab earlier this month, she voluntarily donned an alcohol-monitoring ankle bracelet (sure to become de rigueur among Hollywood's bad-girl set). At the time, her publicist declared, "She is wearing the bracelet so there are no questions about her sobriety if she chooses to go dancing or dining in a place where alcohol is served."

Alas, there are a lot of new questions about the troubled actress's sobriety. Lohan was arrested this week in Santa Monica, Calif., for suspicion of driving under the influence (again), driving with a suspended license and felony cocaine possession. All this comes less than two weeks after Lohan left Promises, an exclusive rehabilitation center in Malibu.

So what happened to Lohan's Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitor (SCRAM)? NEWSWEEK's Alexandra Gekas spoke with Don White, vice president of field operations at the anklet's manufacturer, Alcohol Monitoring Systems of Denver, to find out. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: Your company says the SCRAM has been used on more than 40,000 Americans since it was released on the market in 2003. How does it work?

Don White: The ankle bracelet takes an air sample from the ankle at least every hour, collects that data and stores it until it can connect to a modem and go through a landline to a computer for viewing and analysis. It's taking the sweat, because 1 percent of what you drink comes out of your skin and attaches to sweat, so that's what we monitor. It's almost like a Breathalyzer on your ankle. It's a lot more sensitive than a Breathalyzer, but it's the same technology.

So who gets the daily reports from the ankle once it is uploaded?

It collects data every hour and then when they get close enough to a [modem, it] uploads the data to a central computer where we look at it. [Lohan] was not under court supervision not to drink, this was all voluntary, so in her case the reporting responsibilities were to a representative chosen by her. [Lohan's attorney didn't respond to phone calls from NEWSWEEK.] That said, it's possible that you could be out drinking and we don't know it until the data gets uploaded.

There are reports that the SCRAM can be cheated by submerging it in water to prevent sweating or by putting baloney between the skin and the device. Does that work?

We've had 40,000 people who have tried to find ways to get around it so it's always a cat-and-mouse game, but drinking events will last anywhere from six to 12 hours, so in order to block that you'd have to have it submerged the whole time, which is against the orders of probation. People can figure out how to get around anything, but if you don't comply, we will eventually get you. As far as the baloney, we had one offender do that and we have an infrared sensor that takes a signature from the skin and, anything, including baloney, would affect that sensor.

In Lindsay Lohan's case you say it was voluntary. How common is that?

It's probably 5 to 10 percent of what we do. Oftentimes it's done through a defense attorney prior to court when the defense attorney puts his client through treatment and classes and monitoring to prove the client's ability to stay sober. What it does is provide the accountability for people who are trying to struggle with alcohol abuse. It's a constant reminder that they are not allowed to consume alcohol. [Most of the anklets are donned under court order. Alcohol Monitoring Systems says it has been used in 40 states.]

How sensitive is the device? If someone has one sip of wine, will it be reported?

It varies but we will [catch] someone for drinking once their level gets to above .02. The legal driving limit is .08, so .02 if you have a full stomach and are a very large person will be different for an empty stomach on a very small woman. One thing that makes this unique is the way alcohol comes and goes through your body so quickly, you can be .08 at night and clean in the morning so to be able to effectively monitor, it has to be 24/7.

When is the SCRAM most commonly used?

It's primarily used for probation orders of abstinence to let a defendant keep his or her job, keep his or her family. [Whether or not it is court ordered or voluntary, the SCRAM costs the offender between \$10 and \$12 per day.]

Have you done studies on the SCRAM's effectiveness?

We're currently working on a grant involved with the National Institute of Justice [part of the Justice Department] to take a look at some of the courts we've been in [to] look at effectiveness. [According to Alcohol Monitoring Systems's internal statistics, 66 percent of clients are fully compliant; the 34 percent noncompliant cases are defined as confirmed drinking or tampering with the device to avoid detection.] Remember, these people are not first time, they are second- or third-time offenders with extreme, high [blood-alcohol] levels, so these are pretty hard-core groups, and it's been effective. The bigger question is how effective it is after the bracelet is taken off, and that is yet to be determined. We've been to court over 140 times, and the technology has been upheld.

Could someone tamper with the device or try to block detection by placing something between it and the skin?

The bracelet has anti-tamper hardware on it where if you try to block it or put something between the ankle and the bracelet it would pick that up. Oftentimes what happens is they try to block the sample but we still see alcohol through it, we may see a little less but we still clearly see the tamper attempt, and we can generally see the alcohol, too.

What does this product offer the American justice system?

For the judges, they can assure public safety without having to lock these people up since they don't really have room in the jails, and typically these people, if they stay off alcohol, can be productive. So for the judges, it helps manage their risk while they put these people back in the street. For prosecution, if they can't put them in jail, they want some form of accountability—and for the defense, they want to prove their client's ability to stay sober. [Not all defense attorneys approve of SCRAM. Steve Oberman, chairman of the DUI committee for the National Association of Defense Attorneys, says: "Some ... question the reliability of the device. Whether it's picking up alcohol that has been consumed or another interference."]

What do you think about the coverage of Lohan?

I think it's a shame that what goes on in Hollywood overshadows [the fact] that in this country 18 million people have alcohol-abuse problems, and that doesn't count the collateral damage on families. We have 1.4 million DUI arrests each year. Forty percent of the people in our criminal-justice system have to do with an alcohol-related offense. So somehow we've got to get this figured out.

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19997490/site/newsweek/page/0/>

[MSN Privacy . Legal](#)

© 2007 MSNBC.com