

# Poppy Seed Drug Test

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Episode Name: Poppy Seed Drug Test

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Myths: Lawn Chair Balloon, Poppy Seed Drug Test, Goldfinger

Myth: Lawn Chair Balloon

On July 2, 1982, Larry Walters attached 45 weather balloons to a lawn chair and shot up like a cork to 16,000 feet. Armed with little more than a hand held BB gun to descend by shooting the balloons one by one, he was too frightened to use it for fear that he would plummet to the earth. The myth states that he flew for 14 hours until he was rescued by helicopter.

The Experts:

Heather Joseph-Witham, folklorist, helps explain the myth.

Mark Barry, Larry Walters Web site author, says the myth is true. Walters's girlfriend, Carol, spent her life savings and maxed out her credit cards to help pay for the equipment. She also helped Larry inflate the balloons. The launching site was located in San Pedro, Calif., and contrary to myth Larry actually crashed into power lines in Long Beach, blacking out a neighborhood.

Lakshmi Bhukta, Kaysam Meteorological Balloons, states that there are different types of weather balloons. Some have a shelf life of one year, some of two years and some can last up to six years.

Larry Walters, lawn chair balloonist (archive video clip only). "I would only do it again if it was sanctioned by the FAA and if it had FAA approval, so it doesn't look like I'd be doing it again."

Federal Aviation Administration, governmental agency, didn't want a representative to comment or appear on camera. They did send a fax confirming many of the original details of the story, including a \$1,500 fine.

Quotable Moments:

Adam: "You know it's the sorta thing where its like you could call to you're blue in the face and no one would know who you should talk to, and then if you did it and there was a traffic stall up and people got pissed off it would still take them like three weeks to figure out who should punish you."

Jamie: "Is this something that would be legal for us to do?"

Action/Results: The goal is to determine if buoyancy can be achieved using 42 weather balloons. Adam wants to be a purist and since the myth specifically states that the balloons Larry used came from an army surplus store, that's what he wants. Adam orders 42 balloons plus some extra as a just-in-case measure. They were \$40 each, except for one person that was willing to part with them for \$10 each, but those balloons were 20 years old. Meanwhile Jamie was checking on the legality of the experiment. The plan was simple: Attach four clusters of balloons to different points on a harness and then go for a ride, but the harness was not comfortable and a frame was made of square steel tubing and the clusters were attached to eye bolts on the frame.

The next problem came when Adam was ordering helium, the sales person told him one T-sized cylinder (291 cu. ft.) would fill two balloons, Adam calculated the volume of the sphere that each balloon would be, and ordered five T-sized cylinders, at a price of \$700. It turned out he needed four times that amount of helium. They inflated a balloon with air and hoisted it in Jamie's shop to test the BB gun. The BB gun shot clean through, leaving two holes hardly large enough to pop the balloon. When the balloon does break it does so catastrophically, not inspiring confidence in Adam. In the end Adam has a successful flight to 75 feet and the gun they chose to use gets Adam down safely. Myth Confirmed.

Myth: Poppy Seed Drug Test

If you eat a poppy seed bagel or poppy seed cake in the morning you will test positive for opiates on a drug screen.

## The Experts:

Heather Joseph-Witham, folklorist, this is not usually told in story form, just as an unsubstantiated rumor. It plays on the fact that we are all afraid of random drug testing, and we may be against it, but we all want our pilots to be clean.

Larry Dougherty, private investigator, this is a very alive debate, as many people say you will test positive as those who say you won't. He worked as a newspaper reporter in Florida in 1997 where he covered a story about a woman who successfully sued after an employer withdrew a lucrative job offer after she ate two bagels the morning of the interview. The woman was awarded \$859,000.

Dr. Kent Holtorf, author of "Ur-ine Trouble," the screening urine tests are an amino assay test that works by having antibodies directed at the compound it is looking for. In the case of the opiate test they are looking for codeine and morphine in urine, the two substances that heroin is broken down into. Poppy seeds have codeine and morphine in them, they are the heroin poppy seeds, but the seeds have a very low concentration so there are no physical or mental effects. He explains that a false positive is when a drug test comes back positive when an illicit drug was not taken. One study showed as much as a 50% false-positive rate for these tests, and another study showed that a person can test positive for up to 72 hours after eating a poppy seed bagel.

## Quotable Moments:

Adam: "This is going to cure me of my love for poppy seed cake once and for all."

Action/Results: Opiate drug tests are ordered through the Internet. The only other supplies needed were containers for urine and bagels and poppy seed cake. To make sure the tests are working and that there are no interference with other foods, both Adam and Jamie take the test before eating anything with poppy seeds. Both tests turn out negative. A coin flip is used to determine who gets to eat what, Jamie gets the bagels and Adam gets the cake. To determine if there is a specific dosage needed, Adam will eat a large amount of poppy seeds, the entire 2,600-calorie loaf, and Jamie will eat a normal amount, three bagels. The tests are administered at a half hour, one hour, two hours, four hours, eight hours and 18 hours after beginning to eat the seeds. Adam tests positive after a half hour, but it takes two hours before Jamie tests positive. The next morning they finally test negative again, 18 hours later.

Adam decides to get to the bottom of this and calls several drug test companies to see if the tests are sensitive enough to read poppy seeds and they all pretend to have never even heard of this myth. When Adam confronts them about the possibility of a false positive and that he wants confirmation they won't allow a "sample" to be shipped to them to test for a false positive. Adam finally gets answers when he calls a company in Europe that confirmed that the test can detect 300 to 1,200 nano grams (that's one-billionth of a gram) of codeine. Myth Confirmed.

## Myth: Goldfinger

A person covered in gold paint will die. To prevent this an open area of skin should be left open at the base of the spine.

## The Experts:

Heather Joseph-Witham, folklorist, helps explain the myth.

Ronald R Brancaccio, dermatologist. In the James Bond movie "Goldfinger," Shirley Eaton played a secretary that betrayed her boss, Goldfinger, and was murdered by having her skin covered with gold paint. He thinks that this myth may be based on chemicals that were included in the past in make-up paints most notably lead. He says the amount of oxygen absorbed through the skin is minimal, and same with the carbon dioxide. He also stated that this should not be tried by the viewers because covering the body in paint can cause heat stroke.

Shirley Eaton, actress. She says the morning of the shoot wasn't pleasant because she felt like she had the flu. Eaton says removing the paint was not a pleasant experience either. She is also very much alive.

Action/Results: Paramedics take Jamie's vital signs while he runs on a treadmill for 10 minutes. Then Jamie is painted with latex-based gold paint and runs on the treadmill for another 10 minutes to see if there is a difference in the vital signs. To insure there is no allergic reaction a test patch of paint is placed on Jamie. On the first run on the treadmill Jamie's blood pressure is 134/90, perfectly normal. After the paint is applied and before Jamie starts running on the treadmill his blood pressure rises to 140/110, and he says it feels like he is coming down with the flu. The paramedics become worried and do a consult over the radio; the recommendation is not to have Jamie run on the treadmill. Once the gold paint is removed Jamie feels normal. Inconclusive. Jamie thinks everything would have been fine and the myth would have been busted, but why take a chance.