

BAC Test Refusal Penalties

Every state has an [implied consent law](#) that stipulates that drivers consent to be tested if they are suspected of driving under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. Test refusal (breath, blood, urine) is often the first step a drunk driver takes in avoiding prosecution and sentencing. Many DUI suspects do not cooperate with the police by refusing to answer questions, take the standardized field sobriety tests (SFSTs), or take a breath test. When drivers refuse to provide a chemical test, police officers are hindered in gathering the evidence needed to support a DUI charge. Even without the test results, DUI charges may still be brought against the offender, but conviction depends entirely on the law enforcement officer's observations and subsequent testimony. By refusing to submit to a chemical test, drunk drivers can potentially avoid a criminal conviction and may not be identified as a repeat offender the next time they are stopped.

Test refusals are most common among hardcore/repeat drunk drivers, primarily because these individuals know that their test results will be high, they are familiar with loopholes in DUI laws, and they know that sanctions for refusing to cooperate with law enforcement may be far less severe than sanctions for a DUI conviction. In most states, the penalties for refusal involve administrative license suspensions of 90 to 180 days. This is typically less punitive than the criminal penalties for failing a chemical test for DUI.

In response to high BAC test refusal rates, a number of states have implemented No Refusal programs to reduce the number of test refusals. No Refusal programs ensure BAC test results by enabling police officers to obtain a search warrant from a judge or magistrate for blood samples of drunk driving suspects. The use of warrants to obtain a chemical test can successfully reduce the number of test refusals and subsequently, result in more pleas and convictions as well as fewer trials (Hedlund and Beirness, 2007).

Research Highlights:

- Law enforcement officers reported experiencing test refusals in 1/3 of the cases they processed, with refusal percentages running even higher among hardcore drunk drivers (Robertson and Simpson, 2003).
- Nationwide, an average of 24% of drivers arrested for DUI refuse the BAC test (Jones & Nichols, 2012; Namuswe et al., 2014). Some states report refusal rates of up to 50% for drivers with a prior DUI conviction (Jones and Lacey, 2000).
- In a 2002 study on DUI prosecutions, 3/4 of the prosecutors interviewed said the BAC test was the single most critical piece of evidence needed for a conviction, evidence they are frequently without (Simpson and Robertson, 2002).
- Zwicker et al. (2005) found that chemical test refusal rates tend to be lower in states where the consequences of refusal are greater than the consequences of test failure.
- To date, no study has examined whether stronger test refusal penalties are associated with a reduction in alcohol-impaired crashes (Goodwin et al., 2015).

- The National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances (NCUTLO) recommends in its DUI model law that the penalty for test refusal should be double the penalty for test failure. It also recommends that a driver's refusal to take a BAC test be admissible in court.

Court Rulings:

McNeely v. Missouri: The 2013 Supreme Court (SCOTUS) ruling in [McNeely v. Missouri](#) established that the natural metabolization of alcohol in the blood stream does not present a per se exigency that justifies an exception to the warrant requirement in all drunk driving cases. Rather, the Court opined that exigency must be determined based upon the totality of circumstances in individual cases. Specifically, the Court said that in *"those drunk driving investigations where police officers can reasonably obtain a warrant before a blood sample can be drawn without significantly undermining the efficacy of the search, the Fourth Amendment mandates that they do so"* (Missouri v. McNeely, 133 S.Ct. 1552, 1561 (2013)).

This ruling has created a complex situation for law enforcement because it did not identify the precise circumstances under which an officer would be justified in concluding that exigent circumstances existed. Though it does leave some questions unanswered, McNeely clearly allows for warrantless blood draws when exigent circumstances can be shown. Under McNeely, officers should be able to obtain warrantless draws where there has been a crash that will require time to investigate thereby delaying any test, where they have made repeated unsuccessful attempts to contact a prosecutor or judge, or where there is evidence that a substantial portion of alcohol consumed is being eliminated based on the time of the suspect's last drink.

Birchfield v. North Dakota: In the [5-3 majority opinion](#) delivered by Justice Alito in June of 2016, SCOTUS answered whether, in the absence of a warrant, a state may make it a crime for a driver to refuse a chemical test to detect the presence of alcohol in the person's blood. In short, SCOTUS determined that warrants are not required for breath tests in DUI cases but are required for blood draws. Criminal penalties can still be applied for refusing to submit to a breath test, but only administrative penalties can be applied for refusing to submit to a blood draw.

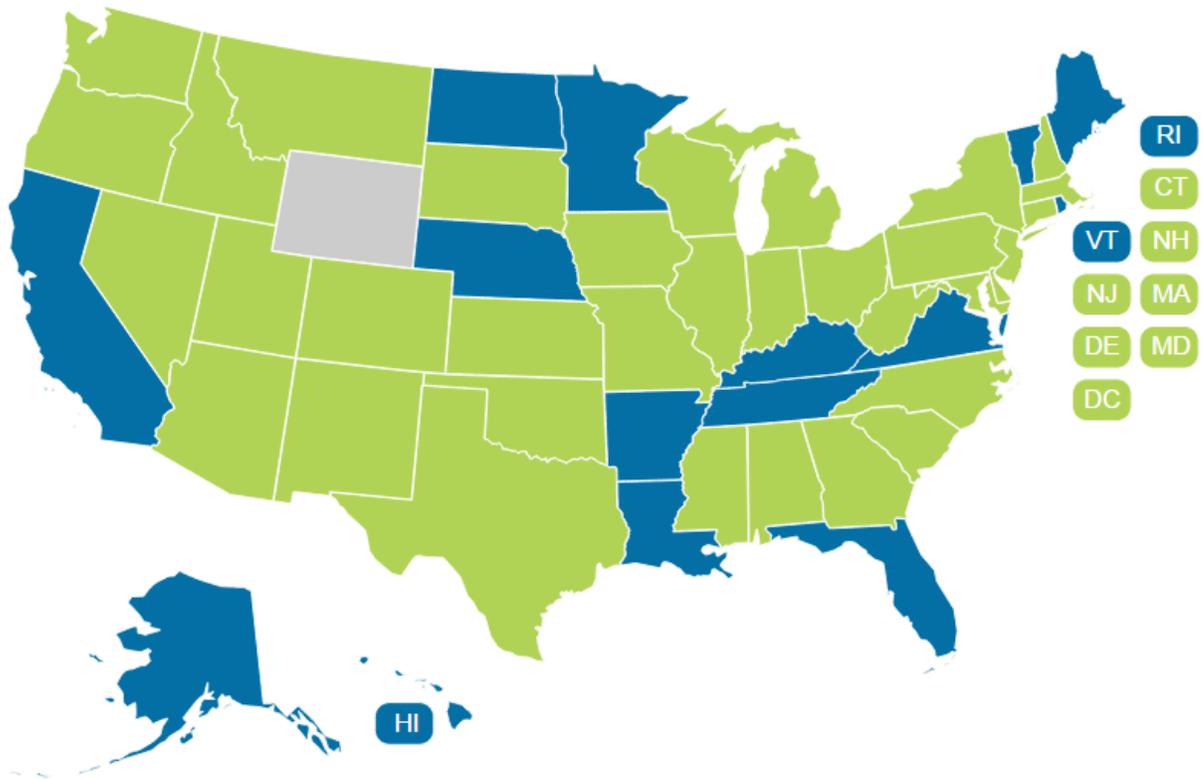
The court held that under the Fourth Amendment (which protects individuals from unreasonable search and seizure), warrantless breath tests incident to arrest are permitted; warrantless blood draws are not. In making this determination, the justices took into consideration the invasiveness of both forms of chemical testing. They ruled that *"breath tests are significantly less intrusive than blood tests and in most cases amply serve law enforcement interests."* As a result, a breath test may be administered as a search incident to a lawful arrest for impaired driving, thereby creating an exception to the warrant requirement and denying the right to refuse. Blood testing, on the other hand, involves the piercing of the skin which is a greater intrusion of individual privacy. The invasive nature of the testing makes it unreasonable for law enforcement to obtain the sample absent a warrant. The court did however, acknowledge that the exigent circumstances exception to the warrant requirement (as outlined in McNeely) remains.

In addressing the issue of criminal refusal penalties, the court determined that *"there must be a limit to the consequences which motorists may be deemed to have consented by virtue of a decision to drive on private roads... we conclude that motorists cannot be deemed to have consented to submit to a blood test on pain of committing a criminal offense."* In other words, refusal to submit to a blood test can no longer incur criminal sanctions. Under the court's ruling, there appears to be nothing that precludes states from continuing to apply criminal penalties for refusing to submit to a breath test.

Multiple states have criminal test refusal penalties in some form. These laws apply to both breath and blood tests and therefore, minor revisions to statutes may be required in these jurisdictions. This decision will also require states to examine their impaired driving enforcement practices.

Prevalence:

All states except Wyoming have administrative penalties for chemical test refusal. Currently, 15 states have established criminal penalties in addition to administrative penalties for BAC test refusal (AK, AR, CA, FL, HI, KY, LA, ME, MN, NE, ND, RI, TN, VT, and VA).¹



STATE LAW: BAC TEST REFUSAL

Administrative penalties Administrative and criminal penalties None

Access Responsibility.org’s interactive [State Laws Map](#) to explore the visual display of this information.

Responsibility.org Position:

The Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility supports the efforts of law enforcement and prosecutors to effectively identify and prosecute suspected DUI offenders. In an effort to deter offenders from refusing to submit to a chemical test (and therefore, avoid prosecution), Responsibility.org supports criminalizing breath test refusal. The penalties for test refusal should be more punitive than those for a DUI conviction. We also support the use of electronic warrant systems and No Refusal programs to ensure the timely obtainment of warrants in instances where a blood draw is required.

¹ Note that in some of these states, criminal penalties for refusal only apply to drivers with previous convictions or in special circumstances.

References:

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- Namuswe, E., Coleman, H., & Berning, A. (2014). *Traffic Safety Facts: Breath Test Refusal Rates in the United States*. DOT HS 811 881. Washington, D.C.: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
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