

How to Test for Blackouts

It can be difficult to identify whether someone is in a blacked-out state. People in blackouts are still able to walk, talk, have a conversation and retain basic functioning skills. Someone doesn't have to act out of the ordinary to be in a blacked out state. Just because they don't rant or rave, pick fights, fall down or vomit doesn't mean they aren't experiencing a blackout.



So, how can you tell if someone IS blacked out?

Repeating the same story (or information or opinion) is a sure sign that short-term memory is gone and the person has blacked out.

Sweeney (2004) has also proposed a few simple ways to tell if a person has blacked out:

1. SHORT TERM MEMORY TEST

If you have been with the person all night while drinking, ask them about something that just happened or something that was just said 5 minutes ago. A person in a blackout will not remember something that happened a few minutes ago. Thus, if the person doesn't seem to know what you are talking about or has no memory of what happened, assume they are in a blackout and do NOT leave them alone.

2. THREE-WORD GAME

1. Give a person 3 unrelated words (i.e. colors, sports, etc.). They don't have to be difficult.
2. Ask them to repeat the words for you. They are able to do so because their immediate memory is still in tact.
3. Distract the person, walk away for a minute (never letting them out of sight) or change the subject.
4. Wait 5 minutes and then ask person what the 3 words were that you had asked them to remember a few minutes ago.
 - If a person can remember 2 or 3 of the words, you can assume they are not blacked out.
 - If the person can't remember any of the words or even playing the game, assume they are blacked out and do NOT leave them alone.

Source: Sweeney, Donal F., Ph.D. The Alcohol Blackout. Mnemosyne Press: Santa Barbara, 2004