



Prescription Drug Abuse and the Workplace

Primarily due to easy accessibility, prescription drug abuse is one of the fastest growing trends in the United States. There are many reasons that people abuse prescription drugs. A common misconception is that prescription drugs are not abused or as addictive as the more familiar drugs of abuse like cocaine or heroin. Prescribed drugs are just as addictive, every bit as potent as heroin and cocaine, and have similar adverse effects on the job. Reduced productivity, absenteeism, and impaired mental and physical status are common among those who abuse or addicted to pharmaceuticals. Use of illicit drugs in the workplace compromises the employer's ability to maintain a safe and productive work environment and should be addressed immediately.

Here are a few statistics employers should know:

- Nationally, 4.3 million current nonmedical users of painkillers. Nearly 2 million people have painkiller substance use disorders.
- 23% of the U.S. workforce has used prescription drugs non-medically.
- Even employees who take a regular dose may be too impaired to work, especially in a safety-sensitive position.
- According to a 2016 study published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. economic burden of prescription opioids was \$78.5 billion. Lost productivity was estimated at \$20.4 billion or 26%. (Florence CS, 2016)
- Injured workers who are prescribed even one opioid have average total claim costs four times greater than similar claims from workers who were not prescribed opioids.
- Receiving more than a one-week supply of opioids soon after an injury doubles a worker's risk of disability one year later.
- State court decisions have found employers and worker's compensation insurers financially responsible when an injured worker who is prescribed painkillers fatally overdoses.

Types of prescription drug abuse

Prescription drug abuse includes any non-medical use of a prescription drug or using prescription medications in ways that are not specified by health care professionals. It can also include using someone else's prescription.

For more information or assistance, please contact the NDWA Program Director at 727-828-0211 x102



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Commonly abused prescription drugs

Opioids

Prescription opioids are powerful pain relievers that are highly addictive especially when not used under a doctor's supervision. While many states require prescription drug monitoring by pharmacies, these drugs are widely available on the street through diversion of legally produced drugs or counterfeit drugs from drug trafficking organizations.

Depressants

Central nervous system depressants are used as tranquilizers and sedatives and help control sleep disorders and anxiety. They are often abused to counter the stimulant effects of other drugs. The overdose consequences of abusing depressants may lead to the suppression of breathing and death. Like opioids, depressants are easy to obtain.

Stimulants

Stimulants, such as amphetamines, are abused among people for the high, to help them focus more intensely, to stay awake for longer periods of time, for studying, or for online gaming. Signs of abuse may include change in appetite, jitteriness, elevated heart rate, confusion, and poor judgement and decision making. Overdose could include heart problems, seizures, blood pressure problems, coma and death.

Over the counter (OTC) drug abuse

OTC drugs such as cough medicines containing dextromethorphan (DXM) are abused for their hallucinogenic effects. When over-consumed, they can cause reactions such as confusion, anxiety, irritability, agitation, and mood changes, even life threatening overdose. Over the counter drugs are only safe when used according to directions.

Warning signs

Prescription drug abuse does come with warning signs. However, many of the warning signs for drug abuse may also be symptoms of other health disorders. Employers or supervisors should document their observations if any of the following warning signs are observed. Here are some typical behaviors:

- Dramatic changes in behavior.
- Decrease in work performance.
- Failure to fulfill major work obligations.
- Admitted use of alcohol while taking prescription drugs.
- Abrupt mood swings or moodiness.
- Dramatic changes in appearance.

Putting it all together

It is important to remember that one unusual behavior or symptom does not necessarily point to a drug problem. Clusters of behaviors consistent with impairment may be more indicative of possible substance abuse problem. Obtaining guidance from a human resource expert, a doctor or counselor familiar with substance abuse, or an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) professional could be helpful to sort through the facts and observable behaviors.

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