

Five Proactive Steps Employers Can Take: Opioids in the Workplace

Opioids are powerful prescription pain relievers that can cause impairment, addiction, and fatal overdose. The United States is experiencing an opioid epidemic and Pennsylvania has been hit particularly hard.

Opioid medications are both a health and a safety issue in the workplace. Fortunately, there are steps employers can take to keep their employees healthy and safe, and their companies productive.

A Drug-Free Workplace in Five Steps

Drug-free workplace programs are cost-effective plans that will help employers keep their employees safe and healthy. Effective programs should consist of these five components:

1. A Clear, Written Drug-free Workplace Policy

The involvement of legal counsel and human resources is critical to ensure the policy includes protections for risk management, injury prevention, and liability.

2. Employee Education

Make sure that employees receive information about how opioid medications could affect health, job performance, and safety. This includes:

- Talking to doctors about non-opioid options for pain management
- Avoiding driving and operating machinery while under the influence of drugs, including prescribed medications
- Safe storage and disposal of medications
- Not to share medications with family, friends, or colleagues
- How to seek help for opioid addiction

While illegal drugs used to be the focus, it is now important to offer frequent reminders of the prescription drug policy for your workplace.

3. Supervisor Training

Supervisors are able to provide employee education regularly during individual and team meetings. Managers should have up-to-date knowledge on opioids and they must understand company drug policy. They should also have set steps to follow if they suspect problematic drug use.

4. An Employee Assistance Program

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) offer people the option to access services for mental health and other personal concerns privately. Purchasing EAP services costs money, but research shows that they have positive returns on investment. While many companies have EAPs, few employees use them. Be sure that employees are aware of what an EAP is and how to use it for support.

5. Drug Testing

A Drug-Free Workplace Policy was more easily enforced when illegal drugs were the only drugs banned under the policy. Now, the increased use of prescription medicines, especially opioid painkillers has created an important need to revisit these policies.

Drug tests can be perceived as being highly intrusive, but they can be invaluable tools for preventing drug-related incidents and reducing risk. Before performing any drug test or adopting a drug-testing policy, employers must obtain expert legal advice that is current with both state laws and federal guidelines.

What drugs are essential to test for? Many companies still use a standard five-panel test, which does not detect certain opioids, including oxycodone (also known as Percocet). Oxycodone is the most commonly detected prescription painkiller in the workplace. Don't rely on the standard five-panel test to identify prescription opioid use among your employees. Choose the test panel based on drugs that are commonly used in your area. For more information about local trends, consult with a testing laboratory or local addiction treatment center.

Addiction Treatment for Employees

Opioid use changes the brain, which is one of the reasons that addiction is hard to overcome. But many people do recover from addiction and employer support often helps. Research has found that when workplaces monitored and supported treatment, their employees had better long-term recovery rates than when treatment was started because of friends and family members.

Recovery often requires long-term treatment with medications. Here are two different ways in which medication can be used:

- Detoxification followed by intensive counseling and naltrexone is more effective than detoxification alone. Naltrexone is a medication that stops the brain from feeling the effects of opioids.
- Medication-assisted treatment with either methadone or buprenorphine can be very effective. These prescribed drugs are opioids that help a person with an addiction feel normal and reduce cravings. Buprenorphine may cause less drowsiness or job impairment than methadone. A treatment provider can help determine what is appropriate for your workplace. Both buprenorphine and methadone can be offered on an outpatient basis. Because of serious changes to brain chemistry that happen as a result of opioid usage, many people remain on medication for months or a year and some for the remainder of their life. Like any other medical condition, this need not affect job performance.

There Are Ways to Help

In the unfortunate circumstance where an employee finds that he or she is addicted to opioid painkillers or heroin, help needs to be clear and accessible. Employer-sponsored treatment is more effective than treatment encouraged by family or friends. Retaining an employee following successful treatment is good for morale and the company's bottom line.

Resources

SAMHSA Drug Free Workplace Toolkit: <http://www.samhsa.gov/workplace/toolkit>

Drug Free Workplace PA: <https://www.drugfreeworkplacepa.org/>

Adapted with permission from PASTop.org and the National Safety Council's "The proactive role employers can take: opioids in the workplace." Available online at: <http://www.nsc.org/RxDrugOverdoseDocuments/proactive-role-employers-can-take-opioids-in-the-workplace.pdf>