

DRUG TRENDS

Old Drugs, New Threats®: The Evolving Drug Landscape

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For many employers, substance use is still viewed through an outdated lens—addressed during hiring, managed through policy, and revisited only when issues arise.

But today's drug landscape has changed.

Substances are more potent, more unpredictable, and more accessible than ever before—and they are showing up in the workforce in new ways. This is no longer just a compliance issue; it is a matter of workplace safety, productivity, and risk management.

Understanding what's happening—and how it impacts your workforce—is essential.

A more dangerous and unpredictable drug supply

Today's drug supply is increasingly complex and risky.

Fentanyl continues to drive overdose deaths, but

a major concern is how often it is mixed into other substances like cocaine, methamphetamine, and counterfeit pills—often without the user's knowledge. At the same time, substances like xylazine are complicating overdose response, as they do not respond to naloxone in the same way as opioids.

For employers, this means greater unpredictability and increased need for workplace preparedness.

The rise of highly potent synthetic opioids

New synthetic opioids, including nitazenes, are entering the drug supply and can be even more potent than fentanyl. Many are not widely detected in standard testing and are often mixed into other substances.

This creates a growing gap between current drug trends and traditional workplace policies, education, and testing approaches.

Polysubstance use is now the norm

Substance use increasingly involves multiple drugs at once, such as opioids combined with stimulants or sedatives.

This leads to:

- More complex impairment
- Greater difficulty in identifying use
- Increased challenges in emergency response

For safety-sensitive industries, these risks can significantly increase the likelihood of accidents and injuries.

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continued

The expansion of “legal” and readily accessible substances

Not all risks come from illegal drugs.

Hemp-derived products and over-the-counter substances—such as Delta-8, THC-A, nicotine pouches, tianeptine, and emerging psychedelics—are widely available. These products are often unregulated, inconsistently labeled, and may not appear on standard drug tests.

For employers, this poses a critical challenge: substances may be legal or accessible yet still affect safety and performance.

Substance use is showing up in the workforce

Workplace drug testing data shows increasing positivity rates for substances like fentanyl, particularly through random testing.

Substance use is not just a hiring issue—it is an ongoing workforce concern. Employers relying solely on pre-employment screening may miss current risks.

Behavioral and mental health impacts

Many emerging substances are highly potent and less understood, contributing to unpredictable effects such as

cognitive impairment, anxiety, or agitation.

In the workplace, this may result in decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and safety concerns. Early recognition is key to prevention and response.

Stay informed. Stay ahead.

This article only scratches the surface of today’s rapidly evolving substance use landscape. Staying informed is essential for protecting your workforce and your community. To continue learning about emerging trends, practical strategies and real-world insights, consider subscribing to The Activator, a free weekly e-newsletter featuring the latest updates, tools and resources to address substance use in homes, businesses and communities.

Subscribe here.

Everyday substances employers shouldn’t overlook

- Common, accessible substances can also impact workplace safety, including:
- High-dose caffeine products
- Vapes and nicotine pouches
- THC beverages and hemp-derived products
- Over-the-counter and prescription medications
- Inhalants



- “Gas station sober” products like kratom and tianeptine

Legal or accessible does not mean low-risk.

Expanding the conversation: prevention across the lifespan

Prevention does not stop at adolescence.

Focusing only on youth overlooks much of the population. Building protective factors—such as connection and support—while reducing risk factors is essential across the lifespan.

Normalizing conversations about substance use can shift perceptions and influence behaviors.

Start where you live

Where there is demand, there is supply.

Employers and communities should ask:

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