
Seven in ten employers impacted by employee prescription drug use

Seventy-one percent of U.S. employers say drug use among employees has impacted their business, but only 19% of them have comprehensive workplace drug policies in place, according to a survey by the National Safety Council (NSC). While 57% test their employees for drugs, only 41% screen for synthetic opioids - the kind of prescriptions usually found in medicines cabinets and increasingly available on the black market.

The types of incidents experienced in the workplace as the result of prescription drug use are: 39% absenteeism; 39% workers have been caught taking drugs while on the clock; 32% a positive drug test indicated use; 29% a worker had been found to be impaired or showed decreased work output; 29% a family member complained; 22% another employee complained to human resources; 15% an injury or near-miss occurred; and 14% an employee was caught selling drugs in the workplace.

"Employers must understand that the most dangerously misused drug today may be sitting in employees' medicine cabinets," Deborah A.P. Hersman, president and CEO of the NSC, said in a statement. "Even when they are taken as prescribed, prescription drugs and opioids can impair workers and create hazards on the job." Cognitive impairments and physical pain masked by prescription drugs can make employees engage in riskier behaviors and reduce response time.

What employers can do

Develop a drug-free workplace policy, including prescription drugs

Most employers have a drug-free workplace policy directed at illegal drugs and an alcohol abuse policy, but most don't have a prescription drug policy. Since prescription drugs are legal, it's been difficult to craft a policy, but many addictions begin with legal prescriptions. Even when taken as prescribed, they can impair workers and create hazards on the job.

The NSC provides a free [Prescription Drug Employer Kit](#) to help employers create prescription drug policies and manage opioid use at work. The kit recommends actions including:

- *Define the employee's role in making the workplace safe.* A drug-free workplace program (DFWP) should state what employees must do if they are prescribed medications that carry a warning label or may cause impairment. The employer can create a plan around not operating vehicles or machinery while the prescription is in use. The DFWP should also spell out the steps an employer will take if it suspects a worker is using certain medications without a prescription, in larger doses than prescribed, or more frequently than prescribed.
- *Add prescription drug testing to illicit drug testing.* Working with legal counsel, the employer should decide if additional testing is warranted for pre-employment screening, or for pre-duty, periodic, at random, post-incident, reasonable suspicion, return-to-duty, or follow-up situations.
- *List the procedures or corrective actions the employer will follow* when an employee is suspected of misusing prescription drugs or for an employee with confirmed prescription drug abuse.
- *Obtain legal advice.* An attorney experienced in DFWP issues should review the policy before it's finalized.
- *Train supervisory staff and educate employees.* Educate managers and supervisors about prescription drug abuse and what to do if they suspect an employee has a problem. Training also is an underused tool that companies can use to make employees aware of the risks and signs of prescription drug misuse, along with company policies.
- *Review service coverage for behavioral health and/or employee assistance program (EAP) needs.* Evaluate the behavioral health portions of health insurance policies and EAP contracts to ensure employees are covered for abuse of prescription drugs.

Work with insurers to cover alternative approaches

Hersman advised employers to work with their insurers to cover alternative therapies so that employees can avoid taking opioids or other addictive medications for chronic pain. Alternative therapies include acupuncture, guided imagery, chiropractic treatment, yoga, hypnosis, biofeedback, and others.

While 88 percent of survey respondents were interested in their health insurer covering alternative pain treatments, only 30 percent indicated they would not act on that interest by negotiating expanded coverage with insurers.

Reexamine post-incident drug testing

The NSC is also encouraging companies to re-examine their post-incident drug testing policies which has been an area of some confusion following language discouraging blanket drug testing in the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration's recently implemented electronic recordkeeping rule.

"We recommend companies look at identifiable triggers for drug testing, such as operation of equipment, severity of injury or fatality," NSC's senior program manager for prescription drug misuse, Ms. Benham, said. "Rather than saying every time something happens we're going to test, identify the situations where testing makes the most sense and will give good information back to the employer as they investigate the incident."