



Supervisor Newsletter

Increase in Prescription Drug Abuse in the Workplace

According to the Centers for Disease Control, there is currently a national prescription pill epidemic among middle aged people, and the majority of these drug abusers are employed.

A recent article in the New York Times reported that the rate of employees testing positive for prescription opiates rose by more than 40% from 2005 to 2009, and by 18% in 2009 alone. Additionally, workers tested for drugs after accidents were four times more likely to have prescription opiates in their systems than those tested before being hired. More and more often, employees are taking prescription medications not to alleviate medical conditions, but to alter their state of consciousness.

One reason for this increase in prescription drug abuse at work is the lingering recession. There is ever-increasing pressure on employees to perform, and too often they are turning to prescription stimulants to enhance their performance. Adding fuel to the fire is the dramatic increase in prescriptions written for controlled drugs during the past two decades, which has created the false misconception that if you want to feel better, to compete, or just to relax; all you have to do is take a pill.

Unfortunately, there is a sense of safety associated with prescription drugs because they are prescribed by doctors and approved for use by the FDA. But this belief that prescription pills are less harmful than illegal drugs has helped to make them the leading cause of overdose deaths in the nation.

Stimulant Abuse

One prescription stimulant drug with high potential for abuse in the workplace is Adderall. Known on the street as "Addy," it is a federally controlled substance used to help increase attention and decrease impulsiveness and hyperactivity in patients with ADHD. Abusers claim the drug "accelerates your processes so you can work more diligently and quicker." However, according to the FDA, some of the more serious side effects associated with Adderall are sudden death, seizures, heart attack, increased blood pressure and heart rate, and psychotic symptoms. Add to this the fact that people who engage in the nonmedical use of prescription drugs are often polydrug users—meaning they drink alcohol while also consuming various illegal drugs—and the potential for danger becomes obvious.

Abuse of Painkillers

While stimulant misuse is a serious and very dangerous problem in the workplace, prescription painkiller abuse is even more prevalent. In July 2010, U.S. officials reported a 400% increase during the past ten years in the proportion of Americans treated for prescription painkiller abuse and said the problem cut across all age groups, geography, and income levels. The dramatic jump was higher than treatment admission rates for methamphetamine abuse, which doubled, and marijuana, which increased by almost half, according to figures from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

In fact, abuse of prescription pain medication was the second most common type of illicit drug use in the United States in 2009, according to SAMHSA. More than 6 million Americans admitted to abusing prescription drugs in the month before they were surveyed, behind 15.2 million who said they used marijuana. "This really has become a true public health problem," said SAMHSA's Peter Delany, who oversaw production of the report. "Those are our employed people, making big decisions about life—Am I going to get married? What am I going to do for a living? What's my next job?"

Some of the most often abused painkillers at work are the powerful opiate pain pills hydrocodone and oxycodone. Often sold as Vicodin, Lorcet, and Oxycontin, they are the drugs most often linked to cocktail drug overdose deaths in the U.S. The admissions for treatment for abuse of hydrocodone and oxycodone cut across differences in education, employment, race, and geography, according to SAMHSA's analysis.

Ten Panel Tests, MROs, and Training

Employers and supervisors across the country are struggling to find ways to address their employees' abuse of powerful prescription drugs for pain, anxiety, and other conditions while maintaining a safe work environment. Because there is such wide use and abuse of prescription drugs in today's society, employers and supervisors must find the right balance between workplace safety and employee privacy in order

to avoid violating the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA prohibits employers from asking employees about prescription drug use unless those employees compromise safety or cannot perform their job for medical reasons. Many companies have realized the importance of supervisor training and the implementation of drug free workplace programs utilizing Medical Review Officers in dealing with this problem.

Employee drug testing programs should include a Medical Review Officer. An MRO is a doctor who reviews the results of the drug test with the employee and confirms that the employee is taking a properly prescribed medication and has a valid prescription for the drug. The Medical Review Officer can also work with employers and supervisors to assist in determining if even a properly prescribed medication can impair the employee and be a danger in the workplace.

Proper supervisor training is also a critical element in dealing with prescription drug abuse at work. Supervisors are often in the best position to realize when an individual is abusing prescription drugs. While a doctor may see a patient for only a few minutes each month, supervisors see the person every day. Prior *Supervisor Training Newsletters* have included information on identifying employee prescription drug abuse, and supervisor training DVDs on the topic are available through The Council on Alcohol and Drugs.

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