

Safety Zone: Substance Abuse In The Workplace

Imagine cutting your workers' compensation claims by up to 50%, decreasing employee absenteeism by nearly 200 % and significantly improving company safety, morale and productivity. Typically those in Environmental Safety & Health concentrate on obvious safety issues, such as lockout and tag or forklift training to achieve these goals. Yet frequently there is an overlooked but vital aspect to employee safety: Workplace Substance Abuse.

According to studies, approximately three quarters (74.3%) of the 16.7 million illegal drug users are employed — either full- or part-time. One out of every 10 Americans has an alcohol problem that enters the workplace with them when they clock in. A recent University study showed that substance abuse in one Arizona county (pop. 170,000) created estimated costs to local businesses of \$21 million. These expenditures were chiefly related to loss of productivity and employee absenteeism. The Office of National Drug Policy suggests substance abuse in the workplace costs employers \$100 billion annually in lost profits. Some research estimates that up to 80% of employee fraud, embezzlement and theft can be linked to drug abuse; and the federal Drug Enforcement Agency states that 35% of all cocaine users sell drugs to co-workers to support their habits.

Additionally, substance abusers are:

- 5 times more likely to file workers' compensation claims,
- 10 times more likely to have absences from work, and
- 3 times more likely to be late for work.

In several nationwide studies, up to 20% of all job related fatalities tested positive for alcohol or drugs.

COMPANY PROTECTION

How can you protect your company?

1. Implement a policy.

A written policy is as individual as each company. Care must be taken to understand and follow state and federal laws, as well as to take into consideration the employees' right to privacy. Good resources can be found on the internet at such sites as Drug-Free Workplace Advisor (www.dol.gov/elaws/asp/drugfree/), which helps walk you through the steps necessary to write and execute a successful policy. Other avenues for assistance are the OSHA website (www.osha.gov), which offers information and links to better understand policy development. Educate yourself on when it is permissible to drug test your employees. Typically this is allowed at such times as pre-employment, for reasonable cause or suspicion, post accident and random. However, some states, such as California, may have constitutional rights to privacy that do not allow certain random testing. Therefore, be very aware of your own state's legislation regarding this.

2. Be aware of the problem.

Know the common illegal drugs and the signs of substance and alcohol abuse. Train your supervisors and employees on awareness.

On a recent OSHA training for a client, one of the new hires was excessively perspiring, increasingly agitated and talkative. As I glanced down at him, I became conscious of his forearms, which were covered in small scabs. His pupils were small, even in the limited light of the training room. When he was writing, I noticed that his hand trembled. After we completed training, I talked to the owner of the company regarding this employee. As this was a small business, mandatory drug

screening of new hires was not enforced, although there was a written policy. I suggested that all the new hires be drug tested and shared my concerns regarding this individual. As I suspected, the employee in question tested positive for Methamphetamine or "Meth." The owner of the company was shocked! He had no idea Methamphetamine abuse was a problem in his small, rural community.

At another training, I had one individual who seemed confused and unable to follow simple direction. Assisting him closely, I noticed the distinct odor of alcohol emanating from his breath. Consulting with the EHS, we found reasonable cause for a screening to be performed. This employee tested positive for alcohol, with a blood alcohol reading of .09. Not only did he show up for work legally intoxicated, his job was operating a *forklift*. The consequences of his impaired performance that day could have been extremely serious. I later found out that this employee had often seemed dazed and confused at work. His supervisors and co-workers attributed this to him not being a "morning person" and were totally unaware that alcohol was a factor.

The typical drugs used in today's society range from cocaine, marijuana, amphetamines and the newest and most deadly — Methamphetamine. It is advisable to educate yourself on these drugs and their affects on individuals. Consult with your local Drug Task Force for advice on recognizing symptoms as well as which drugs are most prevalent in your community.

Across the board, some overall signs of abuse include:

- Frequent, prolonged and often unexplained absences;
- Involvement in accidents, both on and off the job;



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- Erratic work patterns and reduced productivity;
- Indifference to personal hygiene;
- Over-reaction to real or imagined criticism; and
- Physical signs such as exhaustion or hyperactivity, dilated pupils, slurred speech or an unsteady walk;

Marijuana users may have bloodshot eyes and a persistent cough; chronic cocaine abusers may use sunglasses inappropriately due to light sensitive eyes.

Cocaine and Methamphetamine abusers may display increased signs of energy, nervousness, mood swings and can become paranoid or delusional.

Alcohol abusers may find it hard to function the morning after hangovers. They may deteriorate and display decreased productivity.

Be aware that even hours after alcohol or other drugs are consumed, there remains a significant safety risk. According to a 1990 study of airline pilots, after a blood alcohol

concentration of 0.10, 89 percent of those tested could not perform all their operations correctly. This can be anticipated because 0.10 is above the legal limits allowed. However, a full 14 hours later, after all the alcohol had left their systems, 68% still could not perform all their functions properly. Even when employees don't feel impaired, cognitive abilities, concentration and technical skills may be greatly decreased.

3. Train your employees and supervisors.

Your supervisors should be instructed in confidentiality, employee rights to privacy and specific policies that your own company uses to handle substance and alcohol abuse. They, along with employees, should be instructed in reporting suspected abuse, signs of abuse and, in comprehensive programs, understanding addiction versus abuse. They should know the avenues to go to for help and assistance in dealing with

substance and alcohol abuse. It may be helpful to instruct employees on risk factors to their own personal safety in regard to substance abuse in the workplace. The means and reasons for drug testing should be covered, and any disciplinary measures your company will take in the event of a positive test for drugs or alcohol should be represented clearly to all employees.

While OSHA does not require substance abuse policies, many states have state laws demanding a drug free workplace. A drug free workplace increases productivity and enhances the company's overall strength. While setting up a policy may seem daunting and time consuming, the value, both in current productivity losses and aversion of future risks, far outweighs the effort for all involved.