Drugs in the Workplace

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

**What is alcohol and drug abuse?**
Alcohol and drug abuse, also known as substance abuse, is the excessive use of alcohol or drugs, or the use of medications without medical justification. Substance abuse leads to addiction.

Addiction is the persistent compulsive urge to use a substance (such as heroin, nicotine, or alcohol) known to be harmful or to cause negative consequences. The substance is habit-forming and the addiction is characterized by well-defined physical symptoms upon withdrawal and by tolerance.

Tolerance refers to the need to take ever-increasing amounts of a drug to get the effects once experienced with a lower dose of the same drug.

There are several ways to classify drugs. Drugs in the workplace (including alcohol) are often classified as **depressants** or **stimulants** according to the effect they have on the nervous system. A third, important group of drugs when considering drug use among hospital employees is **opioids** - natural or synthetic drugs similar to morphine and also known as narcotics.

**What are depressants?**
Depressants are drugs that reduce the activity of the nervous system and suppress instinctive responses such as appetite. They may be injected or swallowed and cause sedation and drowsiness.

Examples of depressants include:

- Alcohol
- Barbiturates
- Benzodiazepines

Effects of depressants on the body include:

- Slowed pulse and breathing
- Lowered blood pressure
- Reduced pain and anxiety
- A feeling of well being
- Lowered inhibitions
- Poor concentration.

Potential health problems with depressants include:

- Fatigue
- Confusion
- Impaired memory and judgment
- Impaired coordination
- Respiratory depression and arrest
- Addiction.

**Alcohol**
Alcohol is taken as a drink. It lowers inhibitions, produces feelings of euphoria, relaxation, and confusion. It also affects coordination, slows reaction times, and impairs judgment. Potential
health problems (in addition to those listed above) include: liver disease, cardiac disease, birth defects, pancreatitis, ulcers, mental disorders, cancer, and brain damage.

**Barbiturates**
Barbiturates are often prescribed to help people sleep. They may be injected or swallowed. Medical names include: seconal, nembutal, phenobarbital, and amytal. Street names are: "yellows," "reds," "barbs," and "yellow jackets." Potential health problems caused by barbiturates (in addition to those listed above) include: depression, unusual excitement, fever, irritability, poor judgment, slurred speech, and dizziness.

**Benzodiazepines**
Benzodiazepines are prescribed to relieve anxiety and sleeping difficulties. Medical names include: halcion, valium, ativan, librium, and xanax. Street names are: "downers," "sleeping pills," "candy," and "tranks." Health problems (in addition to those listed above) include: dizziness.

**What are stimulants?**
Stimulants are drugs that increase activity in the central nervous system. They often cause restlessness or euphoria.

Examples of stimulants include:
- Amphetamines
- Cocaine
- MDMA.

Effects of stimulants on the body include:
- Changes in metabolism
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Feelings of exhilaration and energy
- Increased mental alertness.

Potential health problems with stimulants include:
- Reduced appetite
- Weight loss
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Heart failure.

**Amphetamines**
Amphetamines cause the user to feel confident, cheerful, and talkative. Examples of medical names include adderall, biphetamine, and dexedrine. Street names are: "meth," "crystal meth," "bennies," "black beauties," "crosses," "hearts," "LA turnaround," "speed," "truck drivers," and "uppers." The drugs may be smoked, swallowed, snorted, or injected. Effects on the body include rapid breathing and hallucinations, and potential health problems include: tremor, loss of coordination, irritability, anxiousness, restlessness, delirium, panic, paranoia, impulsive behavior, aggressiveness, tolerance, and addiction.

**Cocaine**
Cocaine causes the user to feel invincible, confident, animated, and to have a sense of well-being. Street names include: "blow," "bump," "c," "candy," "charlie," "coke," "crack," "flake," "rock," "snow," and "toot." It can be snorted, smoked, or injected. Effects on the body include a rise in temperature, and potential health problems include: chest pain, respiratory failure, nausea, abdominal pain, strokes, seizures, headaches, and malnutrition.
MDMA (methylenedioxy-methylamphetamine)
Tablets or drugs containing the drug, MDMA, are known by the street name "Ecstasy" or "E." Other names for ecstasy are "snowballs," "doves," "New Yorkers," and "burgers." Each type of tablet has slightly different effects. Ecstasy is usually taken orally. Although rare, ecstasy can be snorted or injected. Effects on the body include: mild hallucinations, increased tactile sensitivity, empathic feelings, and hyperthermia. Potential health problems include impaired memory and learning.

What are opioids?
Opioids (also known as narcotics) include both natural and synthetic drugs similar to natural opiates that are derived from the opium poppy. Drugs in this group are prescribed for moderate or severe pain. Medical names include morphine, dilaudid, codeine, and meperidine. They may be injected, taken orally or inhaled, or taken through rectal suppositories.

Effects on the body include: relief of pain, fear, and anxiety, impairment of mental and physical performance, and euphoria. This drug also decreases hunger, inhibits coughing, and slows breathing.

Potential health problems include: respiratory depression and arrest, nausea, confusion, constipation, sedation, unconsciousness, coma, tolerance, and addiction.

Substance Abuse in Hospitals

Substance abuse in the workplace is any use of alcohol and drugs by employees at work. The behavior may or may not obviously affect work performance, the workplace environment, or the safety of individuals in the workplace.

Commonly abused drugs include:

- Alcohol (the most commonly abused substance)
- Marijuana (used by over 20 million Americans)
- Cocaine (6 million)
- Heroin (1/2 million).

How big is the problem?
- There are 13 million American alcoholics.
- 60% of the world's illegal drug market is in United States.
- Almost 75% of drug users are employed persons.
- 20% of workers in the 18-25 year age group abuse drugs on the job.
- 15% of workers in the 26-34 year age group abuse drugs on the job.

Studies reveal that employees who abuse drugs adversely affect the workplace. They are more likely than other employees to:
- Be late
- Be involved in workplace accidents
- File workers' compensation claims
- Have extended absences from work.

Dangers of substance abuse in hospitals
Hospital employees who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol pose a danger to themselves, coworkers, and patients. Because large quantities of medicinal drugs are stored and administered in a healthcare facility, there is a greater potential for employees to abuse drugs at work than in other professions.
Potential dangers include medication and treatment errors, loss of productivity, and safety risks.

Medication and treatment errors include:

- Errors in preparing medications
- Errors in dispensing medications
- Intentional medication errors in which a licensed clinical employee, who administers drugs, may take drugs that were ordered for patients (the most commonly "diverted" drug in hospitals is Demerol, or meperidine, and this practice leads to patients not receiving prescribed medication and suffering pain or other physical problems).
- Poor supervision of patients
- Lack of provision of needed treatments or services
- Carelessness, such as poor sterile technique.

Loss of productivity results from:

- Tardiness
- Accidents
- Absenteeism
- Extra sick leave
- Inability to perform job adequately
- Other employees having to "take up the slack"
- High employee turnover.

Safety risks may lead to:

- Accidents
- Injuries
- Fatalities
- Safety concerns for the organization.

Getting Help about Substance Abuse

**Your role in a drug-free workplace**

A drug-free workplace starts with you. There are specific things you, specifically, can do to ensure a drug-free workplace:

- Know your facility's policy on drugs and alcohol.
- Come to work free of alcohol or other drugs that could affect judgment or performance.
- Do not use drugs or alcohol on the job.
- If you suspect you have a problem, get help.
- If you suspect a co-worker has a problem, speak to your supervisor.

Drug or alcohol abuse can be detected if you are aware of the signs.

Signs of drug or alcohol abuse include:

- Frequent absenteeism or lateness
- Changes in work habits (for example, an organized person becomes disorganized)
- Mood changes (for example, a person suddenly becomes difficult to work with)
- A decrease in productivity (for example, not getting things done)
- An increase in workplace accidents
- Mistakes on the job.
Substance abuse self-test
Do you have a problem with substance abuse? How would you know? Take the self-assessment test. Although this type of test is not 100% reliable, it may be useful in indicating whether you should get help.

Self-assessment test

- Has anyone ever questioned you about your alcohol or other drug use?
- Have you ever used alcohol or other drugs alone?
- Have you ever missed work because you were sick from using too much alcohol or other drugs?
- Have you ever had trouble stopping once you started using alcohol or other drugs?
- Have you ever had legal problems because of your alcohol or other drug use?
- If you can't use alcohol or other drugs, do you get jumpy, shaky, cranky, nervous, or have cravings?
- Are you in debt because of your alcohol or other drug use?
- Does it now take more alcohol or other drugs to get the same effect?
- Have you ever used alcohol or other drugs in the morning?
- Have you ever been in the hospital as a result of your drinking or drug use?
- Have you ever used alcohol or other drugs at work?

If you answered "Yes" to one or more of these questions, you might have a problem with abuse or addiction.

If you have never taken drugs, don't start.

If you think you may have a problem with drug or alcohol abuse or addiction, get help. The earlier you get help, the better. Addiction is a disease that can be controlled with treatment, but you will need help. Either talk to your doctor, or get help at work. Your supervisor or Human Resource Department personnel can let you know where help is available. DO NOT be discouraged, but DO realize that treatment takes time.

Types of help available
There are several different types of help available for people who have problems with drug or alcohol abuse or addiction.

Types of available help include:

- Inpatient treatment centers
- Outpatient treatment centers
- Support groups such as the 12-step programs of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA)
- Non-12-step programs, such as Rational Recovery (RR)
- Hotlines that direct people to sources of help (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment's Drug Information, treatment, and referral hotline: 800-662-HELP)
- Publications free from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug information: 800-729-5586.

Intervention in Abuse Situations

Common signs of drug abuse
Certain signs may indicate a person is having problems with drug abuse. One suspicious instance does not necessarily indicate a problem, but if you note a persistent pattern, your co-worker could have a problem with abuse or addiction.
Some healthcare workers who use or abuse drugs look for opportunities to ingest or inject medicinal drugs while at work. If you suspect a co-worker has an abuse or addiction problem, report it to a supervisor. Common signs of drug abuse include:

- Sudden appearance of unusual behavior, especially if behavior seems to be getting worse
- Frequent volunteering to administer medication or carry the keys to the medication cupboards
- Pattern of administering PRN pain medications in the maximum dosage prescribed and on time, even when patient no longer requires it to be given that frequently
- Requests to transfer to night shift or areas with minimal supervision
- Requests for assignments in areas where narcotics are given frequently, such as the emergency room, critical care units or surgical units
- Frequent reports that drugs have been "wasted" or containers broken with no witnesses present
- Reports from patients that pain relief is not as effective as it was (as compared to other shifts) even though their conditions do not indicate a greater need.

**Helpful and unhelpful interventions**

If you suspect a co-worker is having problems with drugs or alcohol, there are things you can do to help.

**Helpful interventions**

- **DO** know your facility's policy on drugs and alcohol.
- **DO** help co-workers to face the problems they are having.
- **DO** report to your supervisor any co-worker who is under the influence of a drug.
- **DO** report to your supervisor any co-worker seen to be using drugs or alcohol on the job.
- **DO** refer a co-worker who asks for help to a supervisor or Human Resources Department staff member who can provide resource information.

Reporting substance abuse on the job not only protects the workplace from potential accidents or incidents, but it also helps your co-workers to get the help they need to handle their problems.

If you suspect co-workers are having problems with drugs or alcohol, there are things you should **NOT** do if you are trying to help them.

**Unhelpful interventions**

- **DO NOT** redo or finish the other person's work.
- **DO NOT** make excuses for the other person's behavior.
- **DO NOT** lie to your supervisor about an incident involving the co-worker.
- **DO NOT** allow an impaired worker to continue to work.

If you suspect a co-worker has an abuse or addiction problem, report it to a supervisor. If you cover up a co-worker's problem, you become part of the problem because you are enabling the person to continue the abuse or addiction.

End of Drugs in the Workplace Lesson