

# Drugs, Alcohol, and Workplace Safety

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The use and misuse of alcohol and drugs can impact workplace safety. Employers need to know how they can prevent injuries and what they can and cannot do regarding drug policies.

According to drugs in the workplace statistics from the National Safety Council (NSC) in an article called "Drugs at Work: What Employers Need to Know," three-quarters of people misusing, abusing, or addicted to alcohol, prescription drugs (including painkillers), and other drugs (including marijuana) are employed.

The NSC said those employees miss more workdays than their non-addicted peers, which can lead to a loss of productivity. Workplace injuries, increased workers' compensation claims, and higher healthcare costs are also concerns. The NSC found that people working in the construction, entertainment, recreation, and food service sectors have twice the national average of substance use disorders.

Management should learn how to identify problems their employees might be having, as well as how to approach employees about seeking assistance. Supervisors also need to understand occupational health and safety terminology that might relate to drug and alcohol misuse and abuse. Online occupational safety degree programs can help prepare safety professionals to understand these important concepts.

## What's Happening in the Workplace?

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While many drugs can be involved, prescription drug misuse and abuse are the focus of many recent workplace safety initiatives.

"Employers must understand that the most fatally misused drug today may be sitting in employees' medicine cabinets. Even when they are taken as prescribed, prescription drugs and opioids can impair workers and create hazards on the job. We hope these findings prompt employers to take the lead on this emerging issue so that our workplaces can be as safe as possible," said Deborah A.P. Hersman, president and CEO of NSC, in *Safety and Health Magazine*.

According to the article "The Dangers of Substance Abuse in the Workplace," drug and alcohol abuse can also cause other problems in the workplace including:

- Tardiness/sleeping on the job
- Hangover or withdrawal affecting job performance
- Poor decision making
- Loss of efficiency
- Theft
- Lower morale of co-workers
- Increased likelihood of having trouble with co-workers/supervisors or tasks

- Preoccupation with obtaining and using substances while at work
- Illegal activities at work, including selling illicit drugs to other employees
- Higher turnover

## What Employers Can Do

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Employers don't always recognize problems their workers may be experiencing.

Dr. Indra Cidambi, in her article, "Identifying Alcohol or Drug Abuse in the Work Place," in *Psychology Today*, notes that behavioral changes may signal drug abuse, including:

- Personality change like moodiness or irritability
- Difficulty paying attention or lack of motivation
- Physical changes such as sweaty palms, shaking hands, runny nose, or red, watery eyes
- Lack of personal care or hygiene
- Using the restroom frequently
- Absences or tardiness without explanation
- Asking for money

The NSC suggests several steps employers can take to protect their companies and employees, such as:

- Recognize that drugs impact the bottom line
- Enact strong company drug policies
- Expand drug panel testing to include opioids
- Train supervisors and employees to spot the first signs of drug misuse
- Treat substance abuse as a disease
- Leverage employee assistance programs to help employees return to work

A manager can recommend an Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to an employee who might be showing signs of alcohol or drug abuse or misuse. EAPs are confidential and often can help identify and address a variety of issues, including substance use disorders.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has a toolkit addressing substance use regarding workplaces and lists several types of EAPs. The ones available often depend on the type of benefits a company offers, including:

- In-house or internal programs
- External programs
- Blended programs
- Management-sponsored programs
- Member assistance programs
- Peer-based programs

## Drug Testing and Drug-Free Workplaces

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A company subject to federal laws and regulations regarding drug-free workplaces could face penalties if it does not promote a drug-free workplace. Doing so often involves drug testing. In the article "10 Steps for Avoiding Legal Problems," SAMHSA recommends taking several steps to avoid legal problems when setting policies in a workplace:

- Consult an employment attorney to help set up or launch a drug-free workplace policy.
- Set clear penalties for policy violations.
- Put the policy in writing and make sure every employee receives and signs a written copy.
- Provide training to make sure managers and supervisors understand how to identify and respond to possible alcohol and other drug use or misuse.
- Document employee performance and keep good records.
- Don't rush to judgment or take quick disciplinary action.
- Protect privacy and discuss violations or possible violations in private while having another manager present as a witness.
- Be consistent and do not single out individuals or groups of employees.
- Know your employees so you can notice problems quickly.
- Involve employees at all levels of the organization.

An online bachelor's degree in occupational health and safety can prepare graduates to identify the risks associated with alcohol and drug misuse and abuse as well as other health and safety hazards in their company.

## About Eastern Kentucky University's Bachelor of Science in Occupational Safety Program

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Eastern Kentucky University's online bachelor's degree in occupational health and safety is designed to show students how to identify safety risks and potential areas of improvement in workplace conditions. This degree can be a stepping stone to a position as a safety coordinator or many other occupational health and safety careers.

Industry-experienced safety professionals guide students through occupational safety courses, covering modern trends in employee engagement and the establishment of a safety culture in the workplace. For more information, contact EKU today.

### Recommended Reading:

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The Persistent Threat Of The Opioid Crisis To Homeland Security

Implementing a Return-to-Work (RTW) Program

Top 6 Hurdles to Implementing a Successful Safety Program

### Sources:

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Drugs at Work: What Employers Need to Know: National Safety Council

Drug-Free Workplace Programs: SAMHSA

More than 70% of workplaces affected by prescription drug misuse, NSC survey shows: Safety+Health Magazine

Identifying Alcohol or Drug Abuse in the Work Place: Psychology Today

10 Steps for Avoiding Legal Problems: SAMHSA

The Dangers of Substance Abuse in the Workplace: verywell mind