

## The opioid epidemic

### Protect your employees ... and your company

In a recent article by LinkedIn Managing Editor Chip Cutter, a senior manufacturing manager called opioid abuse “probably the biggest threat in manufacturing, period.” In fact, the National Safety Council (NSC) reports that prescription drug misuse currently impacts more than 70% of U.S. workplaces. While certain industries like manufacturing are affected more than others, the epidemic reaches across all industries, company sizes and many different areas within them, such as:

- **Workplace safety.** Employees taking opioids (even if not addicted) could pose a safety risk to themselves and other employees, depending on the kind of work they do. The behavior of someone on opioids can be similar to that of someone who has been drinking. It’s important to have a clear, written policy preventing employees from performing these kinds of tasks while taking medications that can diminish alertness.
- **Workers’ compensation.** The Workers’ Compensation Research Institute has found that the average lost-time claim for opioid users can be 900% higher than the cost for workers not taking opioid pain killers, due to issues like delays in returning to work due to safety concerns and addiction treatment.
- **Health plans.** Treating opioid abuse and dependence is expensive. According to FAIR Health, the average annual per-patient charges and estimated allowed amounts were more than five times higher for patients with diagnoses of opioid abuse or dependence than for those with any other diagnosis.

- **Employer liability.** Employers are increasingly on the hook for problems related to opioids prescribed for injured workers. In a report, the NSC cited that appellate courts have ruled that employers and insurers are financially responsible for overdose deaths tied to injured workers.
- **Absenteeism.** According to the NSC, opioid users miss twice as many days of work compared to people with addictions to other drugs.
- **Hiring new employees.** In congressional testimony in 2017, Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen linked increased opioid abuse to declining participation in the labor force among prime-age workers. Applicants are being eliminated through drug screenings and some are not even applying because they know they cannot pass these screenings.

#### What should employers do?

Even though opioid use is so wide spread and impacts so many employers, there are things you can do to mitigate the impact on your business. The right policies and procedures can help you prevent or limit opioid use.

- **Review and update policies.** Start by reviewing your existing policy and practices and determine if any changes need to be made. For example most employers have a policy prohibiting illegal drug use – but does your policy address use of prescribed drugs at work? A comprehensive policy should provide that the legal use of prescribed drugs is permissible so

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long as the use does not impair the employee’s ability to safely do his or her job. Likewise, the policy should prohibit the illegal use of prescriptions drugs, e.g., prescription drugs used for recreational purposes or used without a prescription.

- **Prepare your staff.** Make sure your managers and HR professionals are prepared to handle an employee who may be abusing opioids. They should be able to recognize common signs and understand what action steps should be taken to ensure the employees gets the help they need. The sooner you are able to identify the problem the better. Typical signs of addiction include:
  - Unplanned absences and excessive sick day use
  - Frequent disappearances from the work site without reasonable explanations
  - Periods of high and low productivity
  - Mistakes caused by inattention or poor judgment
  - Confusion, memory loss, and difficulty concentrating
  - Deterioration in personal appearance
  - Personality changes
- **Utilize an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** If you have an EAP, employees should be encouraged to utilize your EAP benefit and to bring questions and concerns about substance dependency issues to their supervisor and/or your organization’s Human Resources Department.
- **Understand your compliance obligations.** In some circumstances, the employee may also be entitled to time off for treatment under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or even reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Neither protect employees who are actively abusing drugs, but do provide some right for those recovering from a drug addiction who may require time off for treatment or a modified schedule to attend treatment.

- **Implement a drug testing policy.** According to a 2017 article by the U.S. Drug Test Centers, *“How Drug Testing Can Improve Workplace & Employee Productivity,”* the implementation of drug testing in the workplace positively impacts absenteeism, workers’ compensation rates, productivity and employee turnover. Be sure to check your state laws to ensure compliance.
- **Speak with healthcare providers.** If your company partners with a clinic, make sure to talk to doctors about the danger of over prescribing opioids. (See our article to learn more about establishing a clinic relationship.) Sometimes, when dealing with severe acute pain or chronic pain for which other interventions have failed, opioids might be an appropriate treatment. Often, though, doctors may prescribe opioids to patients who might do just as well, or better, with other, less dangerous pain relievers.

It’s important to understand that opioid addiction is preventable and treatable. Look for the key drivers of the risk in your population and begin to address those risks.

**For more information, [contact us.](#)**



Benefits and Risk Consulting

Phone: **800-258-3190** | Email: [Info@AssociatedBRC.com](mailto:Info@AssociatedBRC.com)

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