

5 Things Employers Should Know About Prescription Painkiller Use

National Safety Council



Itasca, IL — The number of people overdosing from opioid prescription painkillers is staggering, killing 45 people each day. Twenty-three percent of the workforce has misused prescription painkillers, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, making opioid use a serious threat to employee safety. Even when employees are taking opioid painkillers at the correct dosage with a valid prescription, subtle impairment may compromise workplace safety.

Recently, the [National Safety Council](#) [1] released a guide for employers, [The proactive role employers can take: opioids in the workplace](#) [2], to help companies understand how employee prescription painkiller use or abuse could directly impact business and what employers can do to stem this issue.

There are five things employers should know about prescription painkiller use and how it affects employee safety and the financial security of their business:

1. **Opioid painkillers compromise employee safety.** Even after an employee returns to work, he or she could still feel the effects of prescription painkillers. Although an employee may take a legitimately prescribed amount of painkillers, he or she may be too impaired to operate equipment, drive or perform other job duties safely.
2. **Workers prescribed opioids have significantly higher workers' compensation claims.** Workers prescribed even one opioid have four times more expensive total claim costs than workers with similar claims who didn't get opioids.^[1] Employers and insurers have been held financially accountable for overdose deaths tied to injured workers.^[3]ii]

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- 3. Employers play an important role in helping their employees seek treatment.** Research shows that employee recovery rates are higher when employers offer or suggest treatment, rather than friends or family.^[iii]
- 4. Opioid painkillers can delay recovery and return to work.** “Return to work” and “fitness for duty” criteria vary widely, so it’s often difficult for employers to determine when an employee can safely begin working while under the influence of prescription painkillers.^[iv] Opioid painkillers also delay recovery from workplace injuries.^[v]
- 5. Using opioid painkillers increase the likelihood of disability claims.** Receiving more than a one-week supply of opioids soon after an injury doubles a worker’s risk of disability one year later.^[vi]

“Most employers understand how detrimental illegal drugs can be in the workplace, but few recognize the toll of the prescription painkiller epidemic,” said Deborah Hersman, president and CEO at NSC. “Strong Drug-Free Workplace Programs, comprehensive benefits packages, easily accessible Employee Assistance Programs and company-wide education are risk reduction efforts every employer must undertake to help protect the health and well-being of their employees as well as company bottom lines.”

NSC also released a [toolkit](#) [5] with information to help employers revise existing workplace drug policies and programs. Visit nsc.org/rxemployerpolicy [5] for the entire employer guide and to download the toolkit.

About the National Safety Council

Founded in 1913 and chartered by Congress, the National Safety Council, nsc.org [6], is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to save lives by preventing injuries and deaths at work, in homes and communities, and on the road through leadership, research, education and advocacy. NSC advances this mission by partnering with businesses, government agencies, elected officials and the public in areas where we can make the most impact – distracted driving, teen driving, workplace safety, prescription drug overdoses and Safe Communities.

^[i] According to Hopkins-Accident Research Fund Study

^[ii] According to Business Insurance, 2012

^[iii] According to Psychiatric Services, 2009

^[iv] According to Journal of Pain and Palliative Care Pharmacotherapy, 2013

^[v] According to 2007 Spine article by B.S. Webster, S.K. Verma and R.J. Gatchel

^[vi] According to Washington State Department of Labor and Industries

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[7] http://www.impomag.com/articles/2014/07/5-things-employers-should-know-about-prescription-painkiller-use#_ednref6