



Drug Free @ WorkPlace

U.S. Opioid Epidemic Continues

In October of 2017, the President of the United States declared the opioid overdose epidemic to be a public health emergency. Since then, the opioid epidemic in America has continued to claim hundreds of lives weekly. More than 115 people die every day from an opioid overdose, and more than 1,000 are treated in hospital emergency rooms for misusing prescription opioids.

It is important for everyone in America to know if any medication being taken contains opioids and to become educated on the dangers of taking opioid-based painkillers. Many people don't know that commonly prescribed drugs such as Vicodin and Percocet are opioids. Opioid medicines bind to opioid receptors in the brain and work to tell the brain that there is no pain. They don't stop the pain or treat the underlying cause of the pain; they just "trick" the brain into thinking the pain is gone. Opioid drugs can be very dangerous due to their addictive properties.

People who are most at risk of becoming addicted and/or overdosing on narcotic painkillers are those who are taking the drugs for the first time and don't understand the risks, those who are taking multiple forms of opioids, and people who mix the medications with alcohol or other drugs. Individuals who suffer from heart conditions, obesity, sleep apnea, and respiratory conditions are also at greater risk.

Patients should always discuss with their doctor all of the risks associated with taking prescribed opioids, and whether there might be safer, just as effective

alternatives. While it is true that opioids are an effective treatment for pain, because of the risks associated with the drugs, it is always a good idea to ask the doctor if a non-opioid-based medication and/or alternative pain treatment can be tried first.

Talk to Your Doctor!

For those who do choose to use narcotic painkillers, it is important to talk to the prescribing physician about the option of taking the lowest possible dose for the shortest duration. Limiting the time that opioid-based drugs are to be taken is extremely important.

If a person takes opioid-based drugs for a long time, his or her body can begin to feel less of the narcotic effect, and the individual may feel the need to use more of the drug to get results. But one should never use more of a narcotic painkiller without first talking to the doctor who prescribed the medication. Taking more opioids can increase the chance of serious side effects, overdose, and addiction. Opioids are highly addictive medicines, so it is important to work closely with the prescribing physician.

The doctor should also be made aware of any and all other medications and drugs being taken, and about how much alcohol is being consumed. Responsible patients should ask their doctor about whether—or under what conditions—they can drive or operate machinery, and discuss with the doctor the nature of their work and how they may be impaired. It is important for employees to consider how their prescription medicine might impact their ability to perform their job safely.

Epidemic Hurts Businesses

Many companies have suffered a negative business impact from opioid use by employees, and it is the employee's responsibility and duty to notify his or her employer if he or she is taking any medication with impairing side-effects, so that the company can take the necessary actions to protect the individual, his or her coworkers, customers, and clients.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta estimates the total economic burden of prescription opioid misuse at almost \$80 billion annually. American businesses bear a large portion of that burden through increased health insurance costs, more accidents in the workplace, lost productivity, and other adverse business impacts.

The opioid epidemic has also made it more difficult for companies—especially small businesses—to find, hire, and retain qualified workers. Many young people in America are not working or actively seeking work as a result of opioid addiction.

From companies not being able to fill positions, to young people not being able to reach their full potential, to overdose deaths in the workplace, the opioid epidemic is truly a plague on America.

Many recent studies have linked the increase in workplace injuries and deaths in the U.S. to the opioid epidemic. For example, one recent study titled, "Opioid-related Overdose Deaths in Massachusetts by Industry and Occupation, 2011-2015," found that workers in industries

with high rates of work-related injuries had higher rates of fatal opioid overdoses.

Preventing Opioid Overdose Deaths

What can employees do to help prevent overdose deaths in the workplace? The first step is to be aware of the signs of an overdose. Drug overdose effects include slow and loud (or stopped) breathing; sleepiness progressing to stupor or coma; weak, floppy muscles; cold and clammy skin; pinpoint pupils; slow heart rate; dangerously low blood pressure; and ultimately, death.

If you suspect a coworker may have overdosed, call 911 immediately. Although the coworker may look as if he or she is sleeping, the individual may actually be unconscious. After calling 911, move the person into the recovery position and be prepared for CPR. If you or anyone around has naloxone, administer it immediately.

Naloxone is a very effective drug for reversing opioid overdoses. Police officers, emergency medical service providers, and non-emergency professional responders carry the drug for that purpose. The Surgeon General of the United States is also urging others who may encounter people at risk for opioid overdose to have naloxone available and to learn how to use it to save lives. Treating someone with naloxone will not harm them, and it may mean the difference between life and death.