



Supervisor Newsletter

Rx Drugs and the Substance Abuse Policy

Employees who use prescription drugs that are prescribed for someone else—to self-medicate or just to get high—would be in violation of the company’s substance abuse policy. Even if an employee takes a larger dose than prescribed of his or her *own* medicine in order to increase the therapeutic (and impairing) effect while at work, this would be a violation of the company substance abuse and safety policies. These kinds of nonmedical prescription drug abuse behaviors put workers at risk of potentially fatal adverse drug reactions, and increase workplace safety issues.

Many prescription drugs, along with medical marijuana, have warning labels that instruct the user to “avoid driving and/or operating heavy machinery” while taking the medication. Company substance abuse policies are designed to prohibit employees from working while impaired, and if a worker (especially someone in a safety-sensitive position) is taking a substance that causes that individual to become drowsy, lightheaded, or dizzy—or if his or her motor skills and reaction time are negatively impacted—the employee has a duty and a responsibility to notify the employer.

Workers should also discuss their job duties and responsibilities with their doctor if an impairing-effect medication is to be prescribed. Many times, the medical professional will be able to recommend a different, but just as effective, drug that does not have impairing side-effects.

Supervisor Duties

Managers and supervisors should help employees understand their responsibilities in

regards to taking impairing-effect medications, and ensure that workers know what steps will be taken if an individual is suspected of using any of these types of medicines without a prescription.

Employees, especially those in safety-sensitive positions, should be given updated and current information on the appropriate use of prescription drugs and the consequences of nonmedical use.

Understanding Drug Testing and Prescription Drug Abuse

Supervisors should also be aware of what types of drug tests the company is using and what those tests will and will not detect. Some drug tests are only utilized to detect illegal street drugs, while others can identify legally prescribed and commonly abused medicines. For example; a standard opioid drug screen will not detect methadone or oxycodone, and if Fentanyl or Dilaudid abuse is suspected, additional tests are needed to confirm their presence. And of course, any time that tests for prescription drugs are used, they must meet all state and federal laws and regulations and the laboratory confirming positive tests must be certified by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

It is also important when screening for prescription drug abuse that a Medical Review Officer (MRO) review all positive tests, because interpreting results can be complicated. A Medical Review Officer is a licensed physician responsible for receiving and reviewing laboratory results generated by an employer’s drug testing program and evaluating medical explanations for certain drug test results.

Following Procedures

Supervisors must understand the procedures for how suspected prescription drug abuse will be identified, evaluated, and dealt with by the company. The company policy should be clear on the conditions for continued employment, work, and leave options, and supervisors should strive to enforce the policy equally and fairly. If a supervisor or manager has questions about how to proceed when an employee is suspected of Rx drug abuse, or when a worker tests positive for a prescription drug, the manager should contact the Drug Free Workplace attorney at the Council on Alcohol and Drugs or the company's corporate attorney for advice before taking any adverse employment action.

The company's health insurance plan and/or EAP contract may cover issues related to nonmedical prescription drug use, and supervisors need to be aware of any help or assistance that the company can provide to employees who are struggling with prescription drug and/or opioid addiction.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) can perform substance abuse evaluations and link employees to qualified treatment counselors. They can also monitor an employee's participation in and compliance with return-to-work requirements. EAPs keep employers updated on an employee's progress and can provide an estimated timeframe for when the employee will be able to return to work.

Conclusion

The abuse of narcotic painkillers at work can be deadly. But even when taken as prescribed, opioid-based medications can cause dangerous impairment, especially when combined with alcohol or other medications.

In addition to creating serious safety hazards; prescription drug abuse results in expensive workers' compensation claims, higher medical costs, more absenteeism and tardiness, increased turnover, reduced productivity, lower workforce morale, and more theft in the workplace.

Prescription drug abuse by employees must be dealt with in order to protect the workplace, but helping individuals to recover is just as important. Rx drug abuse treatment is frequently as effective as treatment for other chronic diseases, and research has proven that treatment that is supported and monitored by the employer has resulted in better sustained recovery rates than treatment initiated at the request of friends and family members.

In light of America's prescription drug and opioid epidemic, it is now more important than ever for supervisors to address prescription drug abuse by employees and to enforce the company's substance abuse policy as it pertains to nonmedical use of prescription drugs.

To help us combat substance abuse, go to www.LiveDrugFree.org and click on "Donate!"