



Supervisor Newsletter

The Supervisor's Role in Preventing Abuse of Rx Drugs at Work

Over the past several years there has been a dramatic increase in the non-medical use and abuse of prescription drugs in the workplace. What can supervisors do to help protect the safety of their employees from this increasing threat?

Employees who use Rx drugs prescribed to someone else to self-medicate a condition, or who use medication prescribed to them for an earlier illness put themselves and coworkers at risk for potentially fatal adverse reactions. Workers who use prescription drugs just to get high are not only breaking the law, they are creating serious workplace safety issues. Company policies should spell out what steps will be taken if an employee is suspected of using/abusing any medications without a prescription, in larger doses than prescribed, or more frequently than prescribed.

Supervisors have a duty to protect their company's employees, and within certified drug free workplaces, supervisors must enforce the company substance abuse policy.

Enforcing Company Policies

Company policies must detail the complete course of action the supervisor will follow regarding prescription drug misuse, and supervisors must follow through on these actions. Each company must develop its own policies regarding how suspected nonmedical prescription drug use will be identified, evaluated, and treated; the conditions for continued employment; work and leave options; and what medical certifications are required. Employers must ensure that the prescription drug use policy is clear, concise, and thorough,

and that all supervisors understand and enforce the policies.

Pre-Duty Disclosure Notice

When an employee in a safety-sensitive position is prescribed a pain reliever or other medication that carries a warning label which states, "Avoid driving or operating heavy machinery," supervisors must be aware that the medication may make that person drowsy, dizzy, and/or light-headed and may slow motor skills and reaction time, creating a dangerous workplace situation. For this reason it is important that company policies clearly dictate what an employee must do if he or she is prescribed medicines that carry this warning.

It is important for companies to have "pre-duty disclosure notice" requirements in place that compel employees to notify their supervisor when they begin taking any medication that could have an impairing effect, and supervisors must be aware of—and willing to enforce—the company policies.

Supervisors should also help workers to understand that (especially for those who are in safety-sensitive positions) employees have a responsibility to discuss their job duties and requirements with their physicians to make sure that they can avoid impairment.

Signs of Rx Drug Misuse

Supervisors should educate themselves about the signs of nonmedical prescription drug use and the procedures to follow to help an employee that a supervisor suspects has a prescription drug misuse problem.

Some common on-the-job-behaviors that may indicate a problem include the following:

- Lack of attention or focus
- Poor decision making
- Decreasing work quality
- Poor judgment
- Unusual carelessness
- Unsteady gait
- Excessive mood swings
- Drowsiness
- Appearance of being high, unusually energetic or revved up, or sedated

Many of these signs and symptoms may come on gradually and can be difficult to spot. None of them is a definitive indicator that the person has a prescription drug problem. They do suggest, however, the potential need for HR or medical involvement. Employees misusing prescription drugs also might do the following:

- Continually "lose" prescriptions, requiring writing of replacement prescriptions
- Seek prescriptions from more than one doctor
- Steal, forge, or sell prescriptions
- Take higher or more frequent doses than prescribed

Breaking Through Denial

Supervisors may feel that there are no prescription drug abuse problems

within their workplace, but the problem is often referred to as a hidden epidemic because of the difficult nature of identifying the problem.

Prescription drugs are the fastest growing substance use problem in the United States. Of the U.S. workforce, 24% have used psychotherapeutic prescription drugs at least once to get high or to self-treat a medical condition without guidance from a physician or medical professional (based on online analysis of the National Survey on Drug Use and Health).

Prescription pain relievers are the leading medications that are used nonmedically, but medicines used to treat anxiety, sleep, depression, and ADHD also are commonly misused. Without medical supervision, these drugs can be deadly, especially when mixed with alcohol or other drugs. They can be equally dangerous when taken alone if the user has a pre-existing medical condition that causes problems with a specific type of medication. Even taken as prescribed, some of them limit safe usage of machinery or motor vehicles.

Nonmedical prescription drug use affects business health. Evidence is mounting that it increases absenteeism, presenteeism (attending work in an unproductive haze), accidents, injuries, and addiction to illicit drugs. Nonmedical use of prescription opioids alone cost an estimated \$103 billion annually, including \$72 billion in medical costs, \$26 billion in work losses, and \$5 billion in criminal justice costs. Thus, it is important that supervisors identify and address this growing problem.

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