

examinetics

Occupational Health Pathfinder

Substance abuse

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Overview

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recently reported that, in 2006, among the U.S. working age population (ages 18-64) diagnosed with a substance use disorder, 62.7% were employed full-time. Drugs and alcohol impact on a worker's ability to undertake tasks competently and effectively which in turn has a knock-on effect on an organization's efficiency and productivity. Moreover, in industries where safety is paramount (for example, construction, mining and transport), and where there is often a higher incidence of occupational injuries, impaired employees not only put themselves at risk, but put others at risk through their actions.

Implementing a drug and alcohol free work policy

There is no standard in the regulations in relation to workplace drug and alcohol programs, although OSHA recommends that organizations implement a comprehensive drug and alcohol-free work policy with some or all of the following five key elements: policy, supervisor training, employee education, employee assistance and drug testing. In order to provide employers with guidance on how to develop and introduce an effective policy, OSHA is part of the US Department of Labor's Working Partners for Alcohol- and Drug-free workplace program which offers support, advice, educational materials and web-tools to promote a safer working environment, free from drugs and alcohol. Employers should also research any state or federal laws that may impact on any policy that they are developing. Take a look at the Working partners website for a list of these www.dol.gov/asp/programs/drugs/said/StateLaws.asp.

Communication and education of employees is key when introducing a new drug- and alcohol-free workplace policy. OSHA recommends that employers discuss with their workers the reasons why a policy is being introduced (eg. safety at work), the behaviors that are prohibited (eg. the use, possession or transfer of illegal drugs) within the workplace and the steps that would be taken if the policy is not adhered to (eg. dismissal from employment).

Drug testing

As part of the policy, employers can introduce drug testing programs to detect whether workers are already taking drugs. Such a program may also prevent existing or potential workers from considering taking illegal substances in the future while retaining valuable staff. Drug tests are usually performed on bodily samples such as urine, blood or hair. The tests can chemically detect a whole range of drug types such as amphetamines, cocaine and opiates (eg heroin) which are often detected in samples, days or even weeks after use.

KEY POINT SUMMARY:

- In 2006, 62.7% of the US working age population diagnosed with a substance use disorder was in full-time employment
- Drugs and alcohol impact on a worker's ability to undertake tasks competently and effectively
- There are industries where there is already an increased risk to occupational injuries (eg. construction and mining). Drug and alcohol impaired workers further increase risks to themselves and their co-workers
- There is no standard in the regulations in relation to workplace drug and alcohol programs although employers are recommended to research state or federal laws before implementing a new policy
- As part of a policy, employers can introduce a drug testing program to detect a whole range of drug types (eg. cocaine or opiates) from body samples such as blood, urine and hair

FIND OUT MORE...

OSHA Website
www.osha.gov/SLTC/substanceabuse/index.html

US Department of Labor
[www.dol.gov/workingpartners/Substance Abuse & Mental Health services Administration](http://www.dol.gov/workingpartners/Substance%20Abuse%20&%20Mental%20Health%20services%20Administration)
<http://dasis3.samhsa.gov/Default.aspx>

Business Owner Briefing
Working partners: for an alcohol- and drug-free workplace
www.dol.gov/asp/programs/drugs/workingpartners/materials/DOL_ProgramBrochure.pdf

Medical Director Review
Worker Substance Use and Workplace Policies and Programs
www.oas.samhsa.gov/work2k7/work.pdf

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