



Steps to update a drug free workplace program to address prescription drugs

Human resource managers and safety professionals know the importance of a healthy workforce that is free from drugs and alcohol. Workers may use prescription drugs to get high or to self-treat a medical condition with medication prescribed for someone else. Workers also may take a larger dose than prescribed in the hope of increasing therapeutic effect. Collectively, these drug-taking behaviors are referred to as nonmedical prescription drug use. They put workers at risk of potentially fatal adverse drug reactions. They also can create workplace safety hazards.

Without medical supervision, opioid prescription pain killers can be deadly, especially when mixed with alcohol, sleeping pills, anti-anxiety or other medications. Even taken as prescribed, these medications limit safe usage of machinery or motor vehicles and can cause dangerous impairment.

Evidence is mounting. Nonmedical prescription misuse increases absenteeism, presenteeism, accidents, injuries and addiction to illicit drugs. Updating your DFWP to address prescription drug abuse is an important strategy in stemming abuse in your organization.

Step 1: Define the employee's role in making the workplace safe.


Opioid painkillers and other medications may carry a warning label that states "Avoid driving or operating heavy machinery." This warning indicates the drug may make a person drowsy, dizzy or lightheaded, and may slow motor skills and reaction time. A Drug Free Workplace Program (DFWP) should state what employees must do if they are prescribed medications that carry a warning label or may cause impairment. Employees in safety-sensitive positions should be responsible for discussing their job duties and requirements with their medical care providers if one of these prescriptions is required for treatment. Such discussions, documented in the medical record, are important to decrease safety risks.

The DFWP also should spell out what steps will be taken if the employee is suspected of using any of these medications without a prescription, in larger doses or more frequently than prescribed. Those in designated drug testing positions should have updated information regarding appropriate use of prescription drugs and consequences of nonmedical use.

Step 2: Adding prescription drug testing to traditional illicit drug testing.

Tests are available to detect legally prescribed and commonly abused medications. These include drugs such as hydrocodone (prescription medication known as Lortab, Vicodin); benzodiazepines (tranquilizers like Valium, Librium, Xanax); barbiturates (phenobarbital, butalbital, secobarbital, downers); methadone (increasingly prescribed as a painkiller), buprenorphine (often used to treat heroin addiction); and stimulants (Ritalin and Dexedrine). A standard opioid screen will not detect methadone or oxycodone. If Fentanyl and Dilaudid are used in your area, additional tests are necessary for these drugs.

Working with a legal resource, the employer should decide if additional testing is warranted for pre-employment screening, pre-duty, periodic, at random, post incident, reasonable suspicion, return to duty or follow-up situations. If tests for prescription drugs will be added to a drug testing program, they must meet federal, state and local requirements. The testing laboratory must be qualified to perform expanded testing. Using drug laboratories certified by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services increases the probability of staying on safe legal ground.



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Step 3: Incorporate language that addresses nonmedical prescription drug use.

Each employer must develop its own procedures 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. Ensure the prescription drug use policy is clear. List procedures or corrective actions the employer will follow:

- For an employee suspected of nonmedical prescription drug use
- For an employee with confirmed nonmedical use
- If applicable, the conditions that need to be met before the employee can return to work

Step 4: Obtain legal advice. Very sound policy is critical.

It is advisable for an attorney experienced in DFWP issues to review the revised DFWP before it is finalized.

Step 5: Train supervisory staff and educate employees.

Conduct formal training to educate management and supervisory staff about the signs of nonmedical prescription drug use and the procedures to follow to help an employee who is suspected to have a problem.

Step 6: Review service coverage for behavioral health and/or Employee Assistance Program (EAP) needs.

The behavioral health portions of health insurance and EAP contracts should be evaluated to ensure employees are covered for issues related to nonmedical prescription drug use.



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