

Opioid Use and Workplace Safety

Prescription opioids are strong painkillers that might be prescribed by a doctor after surgery or to treat chronic pain. They are also sometimes prescribed by dentists after dental surgery. You may find that the necessity to take these potent drugs overlaps with your work schedule. You might notice that a co-worker is not behaving normally or is exhibiting unsafe behaviors, and think this could be due to opioid use. The following information will help you understand what to do.

Talk to Your Doctors About Opioid Alternatives

The first step is to take opioids only when they are absolutely needed and when non-opioid treatments haven't worked. Talk to your doctor before accepting a prescription for an opioid painkiller. Non-opioid treatments such as over-the-counter pain relievers, acupuncture or physical therapy are possible alternatives. Common brands include Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet and Dilaudid. Generic names include oxycodone and hydrocodone. If you don't recognize the name of a prescription and aren't sure if it is an opioid, ask!

If an opioid prescription is needed, doctors will need to know about your personal risk factors before they create your pain treatment plan.

Some risk factors include:

- Having a safety-sensitive job
- Being responsible for work where impairment may create an unsafe situation
- Driving to and from work during the time you need pain medication
- Having personal risk factors for addiction, such as family or personal history of substance use, or living in a high-stress environment
- Having mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression
- Using other drugs or alcohol

Opioids May Impair Your Thinking and Actions

Opioids are strong painkillers that work with your brain chemistry to lessen sensations of pain. They also have serious side effects that can affect your physical and mental functioning, and could affect your safety and productivity at work.

Common side effects that potentially affect your safety are dizziness, sleepiness, blurred vision, mental confusion, impulsive behavior, delayed reaction or difficulty in following directions.

Any of these side effects could cause falls, vehicle crashes or other safety incidents. Opioid use can lead to serious errors when performing job tasks that require focus, attention to detail or the need to react quickly.

If you are taking opioids, you have options for keeping yourself safe while you manage your pain. You can use your company benefits such as paid sick leave, vacation leave or disability benefits. If you need to be at work, inform your supervisor or human resources. They may recommend job accommodation or assignment change. This is important to keep yourself and your co-workers safe.

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Get Help From the Employee Assistance Program

With a complicated issue like opioid misuse, you might not know where to start to find help. If you're not sure whether you or someone you know is misusing opioids, there is an easy and confidential way to talk to a professional about it. Our Employee Assistance Program is just a phone call away, it is free to use, and it is totally confidential – no one at the company knows when an employee has called them. The EAP may provide referrals to health care providers, mental health specialists or treatment facilities that are provided through an employer-sponsored health plan.

The EAP representative can listen and give you next steps to help you find a solution. If you have noticed a co-worker seems to be having difficulty with managing personal or health issues, it might help them to mention that they can call the EAP. If you are not comfortable with that, and feel that your co-worker might be endangering themselves or others, please go to your supervisor with your concerns. Safety is always the number one priority.

Employer Referral to the EAP

Sometimes, a supervisor will refer an employee to EAP services. These referrals can be informal, for example when a supervisor notices that an employee is experiencing work-related stress or personal problems. When an employee calls an EAP, all their information is kept completely confidential, even if a supervisor referred them to the EAP. However, when employees exhibit signs of substance use, test positive on a drug test or have performance issues, referrals may be mandatory in order for them to keep their job. Company policy outlines the types of problems and procedures to be followed in these situations. In this case, the EAP might need to report that treatment is occurring or has been completed, but they will not report on the details of the employee's treatment.

Know Your Risks and Alternatives

Prescription opioids are powerful drugs, and their use can lead to misuse, addiction and even death from overdose. Opioids have serious side effects that can alter physical and mental functioning, potentially creating an unsafe situation at work and at home. Tell your supervisor or human resources if you are taking these drugs and need to adjust your work schedule in order to heal from your injury and stay safe. If you're not sure what to do, call the EAP for confidential guidance on your next steps.

Medical advice and information in this document were approved by NSC physicians who advise the Council on our substance use harm initiatives. These doctors also are members of the [NSC Physician Speakers Bureau](#).