

# OPIOIDS AT WORK

## EMPLOYER TOOLKIT



## Preventing Opioid Misuse in the Workplace

Prevention of opioid misuse, opioid use disorder (OUD) and opioid overdose is complex, as there are many root causes and risk factors for addiction. Most workplace prevention measures target the whole workforce. However, employees may struggle with opioid misuse or an OUD despite these prevention measures. Employers can help prevent opioid misuse and the development of opioid use disorders in several ways. While employers cannot address all of the risk and protective factors that occur on individual and community levels, employers can protect against workplace risk and enhance workplace protective factors.

Risk factors are characteristics that are associated with a higher likelihood of developing a substance use disorder. Protective factors are characteristics that are associated with a lower likelihood of developing a substance use disorder, and reducing a risk factor's impact. In this chart, substance use, or substance use disorder, refers to both alcohol and other drugs, including misuse of prescription opioids and use of illicit opioids such as heroin and fentanyl<sup>1</sup>.

| RISK FACTORS  | TYPE          | PROTECTIVE FACTORS  |
|---|---------------|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Genetic predisposition</li><li>• Having a family history of substance use</li><li>• Other illnesses or medical conditions</li><li>• Changes in the brain due to prior drug use</li></ul>  | Biological    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No genetic predisposition</li><li>• No family history of substance use</li><li>• No other illnesses or medical conditions</li></ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression</li><li>• Childhood trauma</li><li>• Adolescent substance use</li></ul>  | Psychological | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stable mental health condition and emotional control</li><li>• No childhood trauma</li><li>• No adolescent substance use</li></ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Growing up or living in high-stress environments</li><li>• Low academic achievement</li><li>• Unstable or low-income housing</li><li>• Low socioeconomic status</li><li>• Negative social influences</li><li>• Unstable employment</li><li>• Racial and ethnic background</li></ul> | Social        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Growing up or living in low-stress environments</li><li>• High academic achievement</li><li>• Stable housing</li><li>• Positive social influences</li><li>• Community engagement</li><li>• Stable employment</li><li>• Family support</li></ul> |

### Key Steps for Employers

Employers should focus on four key areas when working to prevent opioid misuse in the workplace:

- ✓ Employee education focusing on opioids, opioid misuse and overdose
- ✓ Workplace policies designed to address opioid use and misuse in the workplace in detail
- ✓ Workplace culture that supports holistic employer health and well-being
- ✓ Benefits and health care plans that provide preventative services as well as treatment for OUD

## EMPLOYEE EDUCATION

Educating the workforce is essential. Employers should provide education on a variety of topics, including:

- Description of opioids and common brand and generic names
- Common risk factors for opioid misuse
- Reasons for opioid prescriptions (acute pain vs. chronic pain)
- What to ask prescribers before receiving an opioid prescription by distributing [Warn Me Labels](#)
- Non-opioid pain relief alternatives
- Opioid use disorder, accessing treatment and other support mechanisms
- Safely disposing of unused medications
- Talking to family and friends about opioid use

Continuing education is important. While many workplaces discuss policies on substance use and impairment during onboarding, follow-up education through the life cycle of employment is equally important. Options for ongoing education include team meetings, newsletters, safety talks and in-person trainings. Education can reduce the chance that someone takes an opioid in the first place, and can also reduce stigma about OUD.

## WORKPLACE POLICY

There are many policies that organizations can implement to prevent opioid misuse and opioid use disorder. These policies can be customized to fit the needs of a specific workforce. Workplace policies help set expectations and boundaries for employees.

- Have clear, compassionate drug-free workplace policies in place. When employees understand and follow policies designed to prevent unnecessary opioid use, their risk for misusing opioids or developing an opioid use disorder decreases.
- Managers and supervisors are often the first to notice impairment or other signs of drug use. Train them on policies and procedures and on recognizing impairment. Identifying and addressing these situations early can prevent safety hazards, and prevent opioid misuse or OUD from becoming worse.
- Medical leave policies should be flexible enough for employees to attend medical appointments and heal fully before returning to work after an injury. Overly restrictive policies can lead to employees taking prescribed opioids for longer than necessary or illegally obtaining opioids so they can return to work earlier even if they are not ready. This may also lead to skipping medical appointments necessary for recovery from injury or their recovery from an opioid use disorder.

### WORKPLACE CULTURE

One of the strongest prevention mechanisms an employer can provide is a supportive workplace culture. This can lessen the impact of other factors that put people more at risk for developing an opioid use disorder. If employees feel supported and encouraged to seek help when needed, an early diagnosis can help prevent emerging substance use disorders from progressing and becoming worse.

- Promote a culture of health and wellness in the workplace. Activities may include employee committees on health and wellness, health fairs and brown bag lunches on health topics, and other activities promoting a healthy lifestyle.
- Minimize stress in the workplace. Encourage self-care, and support from managers and supervisors when employees express stress.
- Promote ergonomic and overexertion initiatives and follow best practice to reduce all injury risk in the workplace
- Support recovery in the workplace. Do not serve alcohol at work-sponsored events. Educate employees on treatment and recovery.
- Connect with the community: host or participate in drug take-back programs, and learn about community initiatives and resources



### BENEFITS AND HEALTH CARE PLANS

Benefits and health care plans can provide preventative services as well as treatment. All services provided should be confidential, easy to access and easy to use.

- Ensure health care plans cover mental and behavioral health services
- Encourage annual screenings for substance use disorders
- Ensure coverage of alternative pain management treatments including non-opioid drugs, acupuncture, chiropractic, physical and occupational therapy
- Add a program that helps manage the prescribing of opioids and prescription opioid use. Many pharmacy benefit management programs now offer opioid-specific services.
- Provide or increase access to employee assistance programs (EAPs). EAPs are an underutilized tool in providing help to employees and their loved ones who are working through an opioid use disorder. Easy access to support and medical care can prevent early stages of a substance use disorder from becoming more serious.

*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](#).*

<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018, August). *Risk and Protective Factors*. Retrieved February 2019, from Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies: <https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/practicing-effective-prevention/prevention-behavioral-health/risk-protective-factors>