

## Understanding Substance Use Disorders

Understanding substance use disorders (SUDs) (often referred to as addiction) and how they affect individuals is critical to understanding how opioid misuse impacts the workplace. Employers who understand the nature of SUDs can create effective solutions for employees.

### DEFINITION

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) defines SUD as a long term, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug-seeking and use despite harmful consequences. SUDs can impair physical health, mental health and other functioning. This disease is not caused by moral shortcomings or weakness of character, and it is not a choice that someone makes. Substance use disorders don't discriminate – people of all ages, genders, races, of any socioeconomic status, and living any geographic region can be affected. Data demonstrate this clearly:

**This disease is not caused by moral shortcomings or weakness of character, and it is not a choice that someone makes**

### Nationwide

- In 2016, an estimated 11,824,000 people aged 12 and older reported opioid misuse in the past year<sup>1</sup>
- More than 72,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2017, with 47,600 (67%) involving opioids – every 12 minutes, someone dies from an opioid-related overdose<sup>2</sup>
- Only about 12.2 percent of adults who need treatment for a substance use disorder receive any type of specialty treatment<sup>3</sup>

### In the workforce

- 95% of fatal opioid overdoses occur in working aged adults<sup>4</sup>
- Drug poisonings, a category that includes opioid related overdoses, account for 56% of off the job fatalities<sup>5</sup>
- Overexertion and bodily reaction is the most frequent occupational injury involving days away from work, and slips, trips and falls come in third.<sup>6</sup> These types of injuries can result in an opioid prescription, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive workplace injury prevention programming in preventing opioid misuse and opioid use disorder.



SUDs are treatable, and recovery is the expected outcome of treatment. SUDs require ongoing management that may include medication, therapy and lifestyle change. Once in treatment for an SUD, a person can go on to live a healthy and successful life as they pursue recovery. It takes time to train the brain back to its healthy state. More than 10% of Americans live in recovery.<sup>7</sup>

## Recovery in the Workplace

When developing workplace policy, remember that relapse is a normal part of the process. Most people are not able to stop using drugs forever the first time they try to quit. Though achieving and sustaining recovery may take an unpredictable path, supporting employees as they seek treatment and recovery is well worth it. Employees in recovery miss less time at work, take fewer sick days, and change jobs less frequently than the general workforce.<sup>8</sup> By supporting employees in recovery, employers will also create strong reasons for job satisfaction and loyalty in their workforce.

*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> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). 2018 Annual Surveillance Report of Drug-Related Risks and Outcomes. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/pubs/2018-cdc-drug-surveillance-report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). 2018 Annual Surveillance Report of Drug-Related Risks and Outcomes. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/pubs/2018-cdc-drug-surveillance-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017). Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Retrieved February, 2019, from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-FFR1-2016/NSDUH-FFR1-2016.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, August 31). *NIOSH launches new framework to tackle opioid crisis in the workplace* [Press release]. Retrieved February, 2019, from <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2018/p0831-NIOSH-opioid.html>

<sup>5</sup> National Safety Council Injury Facts. (2017). Worker Off-the-Job Safety. Retrieved February, 2019, from <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/work/work-overview/worker-off-the-job-safety/>

<sup>6</sup> National Safety Council Injury Facts. (2017). Top Work-Related Injury Causes. Retrieved February, 2019, from <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/work/work-overview/top-work-related-injury-causes/>

<sup>7</sup> Kelly, J. F., Bergman, B., Hoepfner, B. B., Vilsaint, C., & White, W. L. (2017). Prevalence and pathways of recovery from drug and alcohol problems in the United States population: Implications for practice, research, and policy. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 181, 162-169. doi:10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2017.09.028

<sup>8</sup> Goplerud, E., Hodge, S., & Benham, T. (2017). A Substance Use Cost Calculator for US Employers With an Emphasis on Prescription Pain Medication Misuse. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 59(11), 1063-1071. doi:10.1097/jom.0000000000001157