



Understanding Substance Use Disorders, the Workplace and COVID-19

Across the country, opioid overdose fatalities are spiking in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ 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. The COVID-19 pandemic adds another layer of complexity to dealing with SUDs that employers need to understand.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) defines a 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 a choice or caused by moral shortcomings or weakness of character. Substance use disorders don't discriminate – people of all ages, genders, races, of any socioeconomic status, and living in any geographic region can be affected.

Nationwide

- In 2018, an estimated 10.3 million people aged 12 and older reported opioid misuse in the past year²
- More than 67,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2018, with 46,802 (70%) involving opioids – every 12 minutes, someone dies from an opioid-related overdose³
- Less than 20% percent of adults who need treatment for an opioid use disorder received treatment, and only 11.1% of people who needed treatment for any type of SUD received treatment in 2018⁴

¹ <https://www.ama-assn.org/system/files/2020-05/issue-brief-increases-in-opioid-related-overdose.pdf>

² <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf>

³ https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6911a4.htm?s_cid=mm6911a4_w&deliveryName=DM23288

⁴ <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf>

In the workforce

- 95% of fatal opioid overdoses occur in working aged adults⁵
- Drug poisonings, a category that includes opioid related overdoses, account for 56% of off the job fatalities⁶
- Overexertion and bodily reaction is the most frequent occupational injury involving days away from work, and slips, trips and falls come in third.⁶ These types of injuries can result in an opioid prescription, emphasizing how comprehensive workplace injury prevention programming can also prevent opioid misuse and opioid use disorders (OUD).

Substance Use Disorders and COVID-19

Mental health and SUD issues will impact employers both during COVID-19's peak, and after the initial crisis has passed. Some of the risk factors enhanced by COVID-19 include psychological risk factors (mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression, trauma) and social risk factors (unstable housing, low socioeconomic status, unstable employment).⁷ These conditions can have long-lasting impact, meaning they may not manifest as problematic substance use until weeks, months or years later.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) expects to see an increase in substance misuse and SUDs as a result of COVID-19. Additionally, people with a SUD may be at enhanced risk for contracting COVID-19 and experiencing serious complications from the virus.

There are many reasons for these two eventualities, which are essential for employers to understand as they navigate both the immediate crisis and as they bring people back to work, including:

- Infection epidemics disproportionately affect socially marginalized people (housing instability, ethnic and racial minorities, people with disabilities, etc.) as well as people already experiencing certain medical and psychiatric conditions – many people with OUDs and other SUDs fall into these categories⁸
- There are multidirectional relationships between economic distress, unemployment, recessions, psychological distress and substance use.^{9,10} While employers cannot address all of these conditions, COVID-19 increases the likelihood that your employees may be experiencing them.
- Several factors are associated with increased substance use or increased risk for relapse or overdose, including:
 - Financial stress, unemployment, grief, anxiety and trauma
 - Disasters and post disaster trauma – post disaster substance use is a behavioral strategy to treat symptoms of psychological distress (i.e. self-medication)
 - Social isolation

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2018/p0831-NIOSH-opioid.html>

⁶ <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/work/work-overview/worker-off-the-job-safety/>

⁷ <https://www.nsc.org/Portals/0/Documents/RxDrugOverdoseDocuments/RxKit/2019/Basics/Preventing-Opioid-Misuse-in-the-Workplace.pdf?ver=2019-08-19-163444-197>

⁸ <https://annals.org/aim/fullarticle/2764312/when-epidemics-collide-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-opioid-crisis>

⁹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0955395917300877>

¹⁰ <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24440.pdf>

- Traditional treatment (medications, counseling) and social support mechanisms being shut down, overwhelmed or otherwise less accessible and not available
- Recovery is often strongly reliant on social (in-person) supports – while the advent of apps and other technological solutions will work for some, some of the most vulnerable (people who can't afford a smartphone, people experiencing homelessness, older adults who are less tech-savvy) may struggle more
- People using drugs are at higher risk for overdose (lack of social network leads to people using alone, increasing risk for overdose; buying from unfamiliar sellers; lack of access to naloxone / other overdose prevention materials)
- People with substance use disorders could be at particular risk. For example, opioid misuse has long-term impacts on respiratory health (causes respiratory depression and exacerbates other pulmonary issues), putting people at risk for serious complications due to COVID-19.¹¹ Chronic respiratory disease (similar to what occurs in some patients with COVID-19) also increases overdose mortality.

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. While the COVID-19 pandemic introduces new complexities and challenges, you can still help protect your employees and help them seek treatment and recovery as needed.

¹¹ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/04/covid-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders>