



Opiate Abuse — resources for employee

You've probably heard about the risks of drug abuse. But did you know that opiate abuse is a rapidly growing problem? For example, 100 people in the United States die from drug overdoses every day. Almost 75 percent of those are caused by opiates.¹

A lot of times, people think opiates are safe because they're prescribed by doctors. Or they may think because they're not "street drugs" they aren't addictive. The truth is, opiates can be highly addictive and are only safe when taken under the close care of a doctor. We want to keep you informed so you can recognize and deal with opiate abuse if you see it.

What are opiates?

Opiates are often called painkillers and are also sometimes referred to as "narcotics". They can also provide a feeling of joy, especially if they are taken in high doses. This nice feeling can sometimes lead to addiction. Some common opiates include:

- Morphine
- Percocet
- Hydrocodone
- Vicodin
- OxyContin

The "street" version of opiates is heroin. Despite the associated happy feeling, opiates are considered "downers." They can make users feel sleepy and tired because they slow the body down. Opiates are dangerous because they also slow down breathing. In large doses, opiates can cause you to stop breathing, leading to death.

Drug abuse in the workplace

Drug abuse can be very expensive for workplaces. Studies show workers with substance abuse problems can cost their employers between 25 and 50 percent of their annual salary.² These costs come from missed work hours, workplace accidents, reduced performance and medical claims.

¹ cdc.org

² dol.gov

Studies show an employee abusing substances: ²

- Has three times as many accidents and mistakes
- Is twice as likely to be late to work
- Uses three times the amount of sick time
- Hurts workplace morale

How people get addicted

Opiates are an effective and appropriate treatment for severe pain, but they're also considered highly addictive. When people use opiates, their bodies build up a tolerance. This means that some people may choose to use more of the drug to get the same result.

People can quickly move from abusing opiates to full dependence. After long-term use, the body stops producing natural painkillers, making it even harder to quit. Once addicted, a person might have withdrawal and strong cravings just a few hours after using. Common symptoms include:

- Stomach problems
- Muscle and bone pain
- Sweating and chills
- Body shakes
- Feeling anxious and "on edge"

Depending on how long the person has been addicted and how much they use, withdrawal can be dangerous, even life-threatening. If you are taking prescription opiates, make sure you talk with your doctor about a long-term plan. If you notice you need a higher dose or you're having withdrawal, talk with your doctor right away.

It is also important to speak to your doctor or pharmacist about getting rid of any prescription painkillers left over after you have used them for pain. Keeping supplies in the home of old prescription painkillers can lead to misuse of these by other household members or even start them on the path to abuse or dependence.



What are the signs of addiction?

Addiction can take over a person's life. The earlier you catch drug abuse, the easier it is to treat. If you are concerned about someone abusing opiates, watch for these signs:

- Extreme fatigue, sleeping more than usual or "nodding off" during normal activities
- Small and fixed pupils that are unresponsive to changes of light
- Poor appetite and dramatic weight loss
- Loss of interest in usual activities and poor hygiene
- Increased laxative use due to constipation

If the person is going through withdrawal, they may appear to have the flu. You may also see the person sweating, itching or acting restless.

Treatment

Treatment for opiate addiction can be difficult and is often long-term. Treatment must not only address the physical addiction, but also the mental and emotional side. For many, the first stage in treatment is detoxification (detox). Because there may be dangerous withdrawal symptoms along with detox, it's important that this be conducted under medical supervision to stay safe.

Once detox is complete, there are a lot of treatment options. Finding a program that meets an individual's needs can be a challenge. For example, there are general hospitals, substance abuse specialty programs, residential programs, and outpatient treatment. Many of these programs are skilled at promoting and marketing their services, but that does not mean they are more effective. Often they may be non-participating providers requiring thousands of dollars in payment before treatment begins. A few of the treatment options include:

- **Medication.** Certain medications have proven to be effective in helping people cope with withdrawal, reduce cravings, and/or manage mood issues, like depression. They are most effective when coupled with additional therapy.

- **Outpatient treatment.** Outpatient treatment allows your employees to stay in their homes while still working on their healing through regular meetings with a therapist. Often they can continue to work during treatment.
- **Intensive outpatient/Partial Hospitalization.** These are treatment approaches that offer more frequent services than outpatient treatment, with the employee attending a program 3-5 times per week, while still living at home.
- **Inpatient treatment.** Inpatient treatment is generally used for detoxification and/or for seriously ill people who require constant medical supervision.
- **Residential treatment.** This is a unique level of care that is less intensive than inpatient, but requires the employee to stay at the facility.

If you're worried about abuse

If you know someone abusing opiates, reach out and offer help. If the person is a co-worker, you may want to remind him or her of the free resources available.

It can be hard to see someone deal with addiction. But you're not alone. Your EAP is here for you, 24/7. If you're worried about opiate abuse, give us a call.