

Occupational Health Group is a service offered to the business community of North Alabama by Huntsville Hospital and Decatur General Hospital Systems

Prescription Drug Abuse

by James F. Gauthier M.D., M.P.H., Medical Director Occupational Health Group



Scenario 1: An employee is found having fallen asleep on the job and exhibiting slurred speech. Patient is sent for a 12 panel drug screen which is 'negative'.

Scenario 2: The patient admits that they are on a number of sedating medications prescribed by their doctor. Concerns are raised regarding their safe operation of heavy equipment.

A new study by SAMHSA shows a fourfold increase in substance abuse treatment admissions involving non-medical use of prescription narcotic pain relievers. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say the most common poisonings treated in emergency departments in United States are caused by the misuse of opioid pain medications. It is estimated that at least 980,000 people in the US are currently addicted to some type of opiates. Opiates however, aren't the only category of prescription drugs abused. Benzodiazepines and amphetamines are also commonly prescribed and abused as well. Alabama is included in one of "America's Most Medicated States".

IT'S COMPLICATED

Terminating an employee is a lot easier when the drugs used are illicit such as marijuana, cocaine and PCP. Making personnel decisions on the overuse of legally prescribed medications can be complicated. Key themes of recent federal employment laws include regulations protecting those with disabilities (ADA), facilitating medical leave (FMLA) and the protection of personal health information (HIPPA). The "Drug-Free Workplace" is concerned with the use of illicit drugs, misuse of alcohol and prescription medications as well as over-the-counter medications.

Drug-drug interactions should also be taken into consideration. It is all too common that an individual with hypertension and diabetes could be on up to 12 medications. One recent study showed that 60% of older adults are taking prescription, over-the-counter drugs and supplements. Antidepressants are the third most commonly prescribed drugs.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF ABUSE

There are usually a number of symptoms or behaviors that should increase one's index of suspicion that an individual maybe overusing their medications. Changes in attendance, a decrease in the quality and quantity of work and increased carelessness or in the number of accidents may be observed. Even increased irritability or changing mood should alert a supervisor or HR manager. Sometimes an individual may withdraw from friends, coworkers or exhibit lethargy. The inability to locate an employee for periods of time, such as an increase in visits to the restroom, car or other places may be another clue. Frequent burns and bruises with poor explanations may indicate they are tripping, falling, or otherwise having accidents as well.

HEALTH INSURANCE PORTABILITY & ACCOUNTABILITY (HIPPA)

Sometimes a supervisor or manager may feel a bit hamstrung in efforts to discern what could be affecting the employee's well being and productivity. In regard to HIPPA a few things should be understood. No doctor-patient relationship is created when a Medical Review Officer (MRO) verifies a drug test. However, drug and alcohol tests are considered medical information. Workers compensation is an exemption that allows physicians to communicate with employers regarding the details of their employee's injury.

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EAP) SERVICES

EAP providers are all familiar with the fact that their records must be kept separate from personnel records. These records can be

accessed only with a signed release from the employee. EAP professionals also are bound by a code of ethics to protect the confidentiality of the employees and the family members they serve.

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA)

There are a few points one should be aware of in regard to the ADA regulations. First, urine drug testing does not constitute a medical test. Therefore employers are permitted to require a urine drug test as part of the pre-placement process. Testing for alcohol however, is considered a medical test and may not be performed prior to the employer making a job offer.

Second, a current drug user is not protected by the ADA. Current user is defined as a legal use within the past nine months. Employers may require periodic, unscheduled testing for a reasonable time to be sure of a former users successful rehabilitation. Employers can hold alcoholics and persons who engage in the legal use of drugs to the same performance and conduct standards to which it holds other employees.

Finally, employers may request a Fitness for Duty evaluation when there is a need to determine whether an employee is able to perform the essential functions of their job. The information obtained from such exams in inquiries must be treated as confidential medical information. The old practice of having employees disclosing all of the prescription drugs they are taking it prohibited.

FAMILY MEDICAL LEAVE ACT (FMLA)

Family medical leave is available for treatment of, or referral for, substance abuse disorders by a health care provider. Absence because of an employee's use of the substance, rather than for treatment, does not qualify for leave. Treatment for substance abuse does not prevent an employer from taking employment action against an employee.

EMPLOYER PROTECTIONS

What actions can an employer take to maintain a safe workplace while respecting an employee's privacy? Utilizing a knowledgeable team to manage "for cause evaluation" for starters. Members of 'the team' can include Health and Safety, Human Resources, a physician/MRO, a worker's compensation third-party administrator, EAP representative and an attorney depending on the particular issues involved.

Having a comprehensive and well thought out policy can help. For example proper drug testing protocols that spell out the conditions required for a "For Cause Evaluation". Employers need to remember that the following kinds of records need to remain separate: Personnel, personal medical, mental-health, drug/alcohol and workers compensation.

Thorough and periodic safety training for employees and supervisor training can help as well.

TREATMENT FOR HANDLING EMPLOYEES WITH "OVERUSE ISSUES"

What criteria need to be met to request an employee undergo a "For Cause Evaluation"? Only one trained supervisor's opinion is really necessary to request a reasonable suspicion test for CDL employees. However, the supervisor's decision must pass the "reasonable and prudent" rule of thumb. This is a determination that requires the supervisor to: assess the facts, signs and circumstances for which the reasonable suspicion has been determined and cognitively deduce that a similarly trained and experienced supervisor (having observed the same facts, signs and circumstances) could have reach the same conclusion.



I Don't Need A CDL, Do I Need A Healthcard?

Many times we have been asked by our clients who have trucks that do not require CDL drivers if they need a health card. According to the Alabama Department of Public Safety, if you operate a vehicle in connection with your business, you will be considered commercial and inspected if your vehicle or combination of truck and trailer together, are over 10,000 lbs. gross vehicle weight rating for all companies that have vehicles that cross state lines and 26,001 lbs. or more if you never leave Alabama. So even if you do not have to have a CDL license, if the truck being driven conforms to the previous weight standards, then a health card is required.

Cold Weather Hazards ⁽¹⁾

Very cold temperatures, like very hot ones, can be hazardous to your health. Proper dress and some sensible practices can prevent a lot of the problems associated with cold weather. In addition knowing the symptoms of danger and how to treat them can keep problems that do occur from becoming disasters.

An important cold weather hazard is hypothermia. That's what it's called when you're exposed to cold so long that your body temperature gets dangerously low. Just like frostbite, the worst case results are unconsciousness and death.

With both cold hazards, you're more at risk if you're older, overweight, or have allergies or poor circulation. Other factors that raise the risk are smoking, drinking, and taking medications such as sedatives.

IDENTIFYING HAZARDS

It is very important to know the symptoms of hypothermia so that you can do something before it is too late.

Hypothermia can also take you by surprise because you can get it even when the temperature is above freezing. Windy conditions, physical exhaustion, and wet clothing can all make you prone to hypothermia.

With hypothermia, you first feel cold, then pain in the extremities. You'll shiver, which is how the body tries to raise the temperature.

Other symptoms include numbness, stiffness (especially in the neck, arms, and legs), poor coordination, drowsiness, slow or irregular breathing and heart rate, slurred speech, cool skin, and puffiness in the face.

As you can see, many of these symptoms are not unusual and could mean different things. But if you're exposed to very cold conditions, take them seriously and take steps to relieve them.

PROTECTION AGAINST HAZARDS

The best way to deal with cold problems is to prevent them in the first place. The most sensible approach is to limit exposure to cold, especially if it's windy or damp.

- If you know you're going to be in cold conditions, don't bathe, smoke, or drink, alcohol just before going out.
- Dress for conditions in layers of loose, dry clothes. The most effective mix is cotton or wool underneath, with something waterproof on top.
- Get dried or changed immediately if your clothes do get wet.
- Be sure to cover hands, feet, face, and head. A hat is critical because you can lose up to 40 percent of your body heat if your head isn't covered.
- Keep moving when you're in the cold.
- Take regular breaks in warm area. Go where it's warm any time you start to feel very cold or numb. Drink something warm, as long as it doesn't contain alcohol or caffeine.

SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

As you know, prevention doesn't always work. So it's important to know what to do if you or someone you're with shows symptoms of cold problems.

The first thing to do is to get where it's warm. Get out of any frozen, wet, or tight clothing and into warm clothes or blankets. Drink something warm, decaffeinated, and non-alcoholic.

For hypothermia, call 911 for medical help and keep the person covered with blankets or something similar. Don't use hot baths, electric blankets, or hot water bottles. Give artificial respiration if necessary and try to keep the person awake and dry.

It's dangerous to underestimate the health hazards you're exposed to in the cold. But if you take some precautions before you're exposed and know what symptoms can spell trouble, you substantially reduce your risk.

(1) http://www.grayslakefire.com/Safety%20Pages/safety_cold_weather.htm

OHG Directory

| | |
|---|----------------|
| Administration..... | (256) 922-6675 |
| Marketing and Business Development..... | (256) 922-6677 |
| Billing Department..... | (256) 922-6673 |
| OHG - Huntsville..... | (256) 265-7000 |
| OHG - Madison..... | (256) 774-7300 |
| OHG - Decatur..... | (256) 353-4325 |
| Wellness Services..... | (256) 922-6699 |

www.OHGonline.org

Holiday Closings

All OHG clinics will be closed in observance of the following holidays:

| | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| Christmas | December 24th |
| New Year's | December 31st |



DECATUR
 1615 Kathy Lane SW
 Decatur, AL 35603
 Phone: (256) 353-4325
 Fax: (256) 353-9639

HUNTSVILLE
 1963 Memorial Parkway
 Suite 24
 Huntsville, AL 35801
 Phone: (256) 265-7000
 Fax: (256) 265-7007

MADISON
 9238 Madison Boulevard
 Building 1, Ste. 200
 Madison, AL 35758
 Phone: (256) 774-7300
 Fax: (256) 774-5300

WELLNESS
 6767 Old Madison Pike
 Building 4, Ste. 400
 Huntsville, AL 35806
 Phone: (256) 922-6699
 Fax: (256) 922-6660