



How to Support an Employee Who Uses Heroin or Misuses Opioids

Heroin use and opioid misuse is reaching record highs in the United States. In 2015 alone, more than 30,000 people died of opioid overdose. It is becoming more and more likely that one or more of your employees will misuse opioids. It can be a tricky thing for managers to handle.

Opioids are narcotic pain medications used to treat pain. Over time, opioids change the brain. First, the brain needs larger doses to get the same pain relief. Second, the body gets sick if it does not get the medicine. Sometimes, this can lead to the misuse of opioids.

Opioid misuse is when people keep using opioids even if it causes problems in their lives. It can affect work, school, or relationships. It can cause emotional, behavioral, and physical problems. If one of your employees is misusing opioids, you might see some of the following signs:

- Drop in the quality of work
- Inability to finish tasks on time
- Personality changes
- Physical or behavioral health changes
- Worsening of interpersonal skills
- Missing work, being late, or leaving early
- Negative changes in appearance
- Unusual pattern of sleepiness, confusion, or clumsiness

Reduce stigma

Many people believe bad things about people who misuse opioids and other substances. They think opioid misuse is a character flaw. They believe it is immoral, unethical, or a sign of weakness. In one study, most people surveyed believed opioid misuse was a good reason to fire someone.

These untrue ideas are called stigma. Experts now know that opioid misuse is a type of chronic illness due to changes in the brain. It is treatable.

Due to the stigma of opioid misuse, people can be afraid to seek help. One of the best things you can do for your employees is to educate them. Offer training about opioids and opioid misuse, and available support. Teach employees that words like junkie are slurs. Name-calling makes people ashamed. It makes people hide their misuse instead of trying to get better.

Educate yourself

For more information, contact your EAP at (866)-723-4332

Or refer to online resources at [carelonwellbeing.com/ccj](https://www.carelonwellbeing.com/ccj)



Learn all about your workplace's policies and resources. What plans and policies does your workplace have for opioid misuse? If you have a human resources (HR) department, start there. Some common policies and resources include:

- Mandatory reporting policy
- Drug testing policies
- Medical leave
- Paid time off
- Flexible scheduling
- An employee assistance program (EAP)

Talk to your employee

Conversations about sensitive issues like these can be hard. You may be nervous about embarrassing your employee. Remember that part of your job is keeping your workers and workplace safe. Talking about things like opioid misuse must be done. Make sure to follow laws and workplace policies, but be kind.

Make a plan. What will you say? What help can you offer? It is OK to check with HR before your meeting. They may have materials specifically for this purpose. Do not share any more information with HR than is needed and legal.

Meet with your employee privately. This is a hard thing for people to talk about. Choose a place where you will not be interrupted.

Explain your concerns. Tell your employee what you have noticed and why you are worried. Give specific examples. Keep your comments and questions respectful and work-related.

Offer your support. Tell them about services they can use. You can also prepare handouts or pamphlets and other written information. Explain what you can do to make treatment or support available. Examples are flexibility with hours or paid time off.

Listen. The employee may choose to share personal information with you. Do not offer advice about her personal life or try to act as a counselor. Refer her to trained professionals for that. Knowing that someone cares may help your employee seek treatment.

Respect your employees' choices. Do not push them to talk. Never punish employees or hold a grudge if they do not want to talk about it or they deny the misuse. First, you could be wrong. Second, they have the right to handle it the way that they see fits. Remember that your employees' medical records are private—you cannot force them to share private information.

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You may have safety concerns. Perhaps your employees operate equipment. Perhaps they drive company vehicles. If you have safety concerns for any reason, set limits and explain why. Follow all company safety policies. Treat your employees with dignity.

Resources

National Institute on Drug Abuse

www.drugabuse.gov

(301) 443-1124

National Safety Council's Free Employer Kit:

"The Proactive Role Employers Can Take: Opioids in the Workplace"

<http://safety.nsc.org/rxemployerkit>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

www.samhsa.gov

(877) 726-4727

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