

Preventing Opioid Misuse: Five Things Businesses Can Do

Nearly 50,000 Americans die each year from opioid overdoses. Millions more live with an opioid use disorder or have family members or loved ones who struggle with opioid addiction. This means that your employees or their loved ones are dealing with opioid misuse right now, creating risks for them and for your business.

It's easy to make assumptions about people who misuse opioids—that they're not the people in our lives. But opioid misuse and overdose affect all of us. People who misuse opioids and die from opioid overdose are our co-workers, our employees, and their families. There is no one-size-fits all way to respond to this epidemic, but addressing opioid misuse and overdose is our collective responsibility.

Prevention Solutions@EDC can help you support employees and colleagues affected by opioid use and establish a workplace that is safe, compassionate, and ultimately more productive.

You Have Employees Who are Struggling

Nearly all opioid overdoses occur among people who are of working age, and 55% of people with opioid use disorders are currently working. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that overdose deaths at work from nonmedical use of drugs or alcohol increased by at least 25% annually between 2013 and 2017.

Each year, substance misuse and addiction costs the United States more than *\$820 billion* in lost workplace productivity, health care expenses, and crime-related costs. Focusing just on the workplace, the opioid epidemic results in the following:

- **Increased absenteeism.** Workers with a current substance use disorder miss an average of 14.8 days per year, while the subset of workers with a pain medication use disorder miss an average of 29 days per year. This is compared to an average of 10.5 days for most employees, and 9.5 days for workers in recovery from a substance use disorder.
- **Increased employee turnover.** Workers struggling with uncontrolled addiction are less likely to meet job expectations and hold down jobs.
- **Loss of productivity due to addiction and incarceration.** Both experiences remove workers from the workforce.
- **Difficulty finding people to hire.** In areas where opioid misuse and deaths from opioid overdose are most prevalent, workplaces struggle to find skilled laborers to fill job openings. People who abuse pain medications have the lowest workforce participation rate compared to people who misuse other types of drugs.
- **More money spent on healthcare costs.** People who misuse prescription opioids use significantly more health care resources than people who do not.

Five Things You Can Do

We need to do something. Here's how to start.



Know the facts.

Myths and misinformation about opioid misuse and overdose can keep people from recognizing the risks they face and from supporting co-workers who are struggling with addiction.

- **Find out what opioids are and how they affect the body.** For people with opioid use disorders, the decision to misuse the substance is a result of chemical changes in their brain and not necessarily a conscious decision to continue using. Having this understanding helps us begin to reduce the stigma that is attached to opioid use.
- **Understand the risks.** While anyone can develop an opioid use disorder, some people are at increased risk. Factors that increase the risk of misusing opioids include experiencing chronic pain and mental health problems and believing that prescription opioids are safe because they originate in the health care system. The greatest risk of dying from an opioid overdose is surviving a non-fatal overdose.
- **Know the relevant laws,** including HIPPA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, and the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act. Understand expectations related to identification and disclosure of substance misuse and mental health problems, confidentiality, discrimination, reasonable accommodations, and special-industry regulations.



Create a culture of openness and respect.

Substance use disorder is among the most stigmatized conditions in the United States. We need to change the narrative so that opioid use disorder is recognized as a disease, not a moral failing.

- **Engage employees in companywide "town halls".** With senior leadership at the helm, provide clear information about opioid use and the nature of addiction. Talk about why your company has decided to take action, speaking to situations that are specific to your industry and resonate with your workers. Invite people to ask questions and share their concerns.
- **Train managers and corporate leaders.** Managers and supervisors are not in the position to help an employee with a substance use disorder, but they do need to be prepared to navigate this important issue with their staff. They should understand the terminology, know how to recognize signs of addiction, and be prepared to engage in sensitive conversations without judgement. Training managers and supervisors is also key to changing any cultural norms that may inadvertently place workers at increased risk.
- **Encourage conversations about substance misuse and recovery.** Recovery is part of the world we live in, so assume your workplace is no exception. Host a Recovery Day event featuring employee stories. Talking openly about these issues goes a long way in communicating that addiction isn't something to be ashamed of. On the management level, model acceptance and engagement. Welcome people in recovery into management—they bring a wealth of positive attributes to an organization, including grit, resourcefulness, and empathy.

- **Think carefully about language.** The language we use to discuss substance use disorders can go a long way in reducing—or perpetuating—stigma. So, make sure to use “person-first” language: for example, say “a person with a substance use disorder” instead of “a drug abuser.” The former suggests the person *has* a problem that can be addressed; the latter that the person *is* the problem.



Review your employee benefits.

In addition to talking the talk, it’s important to walk the walk. This means designing employee benefits to make it easy for people to get the services and supports they need.

- **Consider the types of conditions covered, size of co-pays, and type of plan you pick.** For example, some employers find that when they eliminated the co-pay for Narcan, use went up. The same thing happened when they eliminated the co-pay for mental health services. In rural areas, having a plan that covers tele-health benefits allows people to access help where local treatment or mental health services might be unavailable.
- **Make sure your plan covers evidence-based, medication-assisted treatment approaches,** such as methadone, naltrexone, and buprenorphine.
- **Work with your insurers to educate the physicians in their networks** around safe prescribing practices and the extra risks associated with prescribing opioid pain killers to people working in particular occupations.
- **Connect with your Workman’s Compensation system to review expectations for returning to work.** Consider alternatives to being out of work completely, such as returning to light work duty. Such alternatives can reduce the chance that people who have been injured use opioids over an extended period—which increases the risk of dependency—to avoid missing a paycheck.



Commit to prevention.

Many workplace strategies have shown to be effective in preventing overdose-related death.

- **Encourage employees to always call 911** if they encounter someone they think has overdosed. An individual who is experiencing opioid overdose needs immediate medical attention. Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia have “Good Samaritan” statutes on the books. Find out what the law is in your state and communicate the protections to your employees.
- **Make sure employees have access to naloxone** Naloxone (also referred to by the brand name Narcan®) is a life-saving medication that reverses the effects of opioids in overdoses. Almost anyone can successfully administer naloxone when adequately trained, so in addition to making naloxone available, make sure employees know how to use it. (To learn more about how naloxone functions in the body, [click here](#).)



Connect with the outside resources.

To be the best resource possible for your employees, know what’s going on, what initiatives are under way, and what resources and services are available. Find out how you can support community prevention efforts and how they can support your efforts. Champion community support by facilitating key partnerships with community organizations and connecting with stakeholders who share your company’s prevention goals.



Prevention Solutions@EDC Can Support Your Prevention Efforts

Prevention Solutions@EDC helps business, schools, and public health agencies develop innovative strategies and hands-on tools that promote sustainable opioid misuse prevention efforts.

Our team is known for developing and delivering highly regarded products and training programs that meet the needs of diverse populations. Our solutions are informed by prevention and implementation science, as well as by the multidisciplinary perspectives and cultural competencies of our staff.

For more than 20 years, EDC has been at the forefront of the nation's substance misuse prevention efforts, with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, as well as with states, public health organizations, schools, and communities. Some examples of our work include research reviews on the science of prevention, fact sheets on countering stigma, videos on using the opioid overdose reversal medication naloxone, and toolkits to support cross-sector collaboration.

If you would like to hear more about how we can help you address the risks of substance misuse in your organization, contact us for a free consultation at preventionsolutions@edc.org or [sign up](#) for our newsletter.

