

Wellness Initiatives to Prevent Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is the unhealthy use of alcohol, drugs or other substances that negatively interfere with a person's functioning or well-being. Substance abuse can negatively affect peoples' physical or emotional well-being, significant relationships, educational achievements, finances and other parts of their lives. Substance abuse problems also affect productivity, workplace safety and health care costs.

Cost to Businesses

Alcohol and substance misuse or abuse by employees can have serious ramifications for employers. Employees with substance abuse problems are absent more often, have lower productivity and poor work performance, are more susceptible to injury due to accidents and may have higher health care costs. These costs can represent a serious burden to employers, not to mention the liability of a serious workplace accident occurring due to an employee's impairment at work. It is in every employer's best interest to address potential substance abuse amongst their employees and put policies and protocols in place to deal with such issues if they occur.

Employer Role

Luckily, employers can play an important role in decreasing the social and financial burden of substance abuse as well as guiding the development of a healthy and productive workforce. Employers should consider whether official policy, sanctioned activities or common practices are the best method to create a culture that embraces prevention and supports healthy lifestyles—the best approach may be a combination of strategies. Most importantly, the employer needs to practice discretion when addressing these issues.

Generally, information about an employee's substance abuse, like all medical information about employees, should be kept confidential. State privacy laws, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may apply to information about employees' substance abuse, depending on the facts involved.

Substance abuse is preventable and treatable, with recovery rates comparable to other chronic health problems like diabetes and asthma. If employers promote prevention, provide employee access to treatment and support employee recovery from substance abuse, they can help create healthier and more productive employees, workplaces and communities.

Preventing Substance Abuse

- Provide resources for self-screening. This could take the form of brochures, fact sheets, payroll stuffers, intranet, health fairs, posters and signs.
- Encourage the use of telephone help lines.
- Provide information about the appropriate disposal of prescription medications, including locations of prescription drug disposal drop-off areas in your community.
- Create policies that provide guidance to supervisors so they are well-equipped to not only spot indicators of substance abuse, but also to effectively work with an employee who is experiencing or in recovery from substance abuse.
- Review policies and practices concerning employee privacy, accommodation, return to work, HIPAA and ADA guidelines.
- Offer an employee assistance program (EAP) to help employees obtain information about supportive resources in the community. Emphasize that the EAP is based on privacy and confidentiality, and that enrolling in the program will not jeopardize an employee's job or reputation. This may encourage more employees to seek the help they need.
- Depending on the nature of your workplace, you may want to institute drug and/or alcohol testing programs. Many companies require a drug test as a condition of employment, for example. Industry standards for certain occupations, such as the transportation industry, may even mandate alcohol or drug testing. Just be sure that your testing policy is compliant with federal laws (such as the Drug-Free Workplace Act and the ADA), and that it is properly documented and publicized for all employees.

- Provide and maintain comprehensive health insurance coverage, which includes substance abuse treatment resources as part of the employee benefits package. Where it makes sense, provide coverage for screening and counseling to reduce a potential cost barrier for seeking help.

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