Some Medications Are the Wrong Prescription for Safety

Safety Talk

WHAT'S AT STAKE

We all know that illegal drugs such as marijuana or cocaine are hazardous to use. We also know that alcohol is prohibited at work because it is, obviously, intoxicating. But did you know that many other drugs that we take for granted can also affect your ability to do your job safely?

WHAT'S THE DANGER

Back pain, allergies and other medical conditions, including colds and the flu, are often treated with prescription and over-the-counter medications. These medications, even those sold without a prescription, can make it unsafe for you to operate a motor vehicle or workplace machinery. And the effects may be more severe if you are tired or ill.

EXAMPLE

A ferry pilot was convicted of manslaughter in connection with a fatal ferry crash in New York Harbor and sentenced to 18 months jail.

Assistant Capt. Richard Smith, who was fatigued and taking painkillers, blacked out at the controls of the Staten Island ferry on October 15, 2003. The ferry, carrying 1,500 passengers, slammed into a concrete pier at full speed, killing 11 passengers and injuring dozens of others.

The painkillers he was taking, Tramadol and Tylenol PM, list drowsiness among their possible side effects.

Smith pleaded guilty to a charge of negligent manslaughter and apologized in court to families of those killed and injured, adding 'I will regret for the rest of my life that I did not just call in sick.'

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

As a responsible person you might stop taking the drug or choose not to drive

when you become aware of the effect. But this awareness can come too late, with a traffic crash or workplace injury before you realize you cannot think or react as fast as usual.

Here are some guidelines for safer use of prescription and over-the-counter medications:

1. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the effects of prescription and non-prescription drugs you will be taking that may affect your ability to perform safely.
2. Let your supervisor know of any such restrictions.
3. Make arrangements to avoid driving and operating machinery until you are sure you will not be affected.
4. Read the labels and printed material which accompany the medicine, and strictly follow the instructions.
5. Carry a list of all your prescription and over-the-counter medicines with you, including any vitamins, minerals and other products.
6. Be ready for effects to be more pronounced when you first begin taking the drug. For instance, anti-depressants can cause sleepiness for a new user who later adjusts to the chemical change. Try your first doses in a safe environment.
7. Do not skip taking your prescription medicines.
8. Do not take more than the suggested dose of prescription and non-prescription drugs.
9. Do not share prescription medicines.
10. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about how long you should use the remedies and when you should start to feel better.

FINAL WORD

It’s important to be aware of the possible dangers of using prescription drugs and over-the-counter remedies prior to or during work shifts. Be sure to follow all directions and precautions carefully. Talk to your supervisor if you have doubts about your ability to work safely when you are taking a medication.