Opioids in the Workplace – Workplan



Opioid painkillers are medications for treating pain that can be very addicting. Most people who are prescribed these medications do not develop a problem. Some, however, can become addicted even when these drugs are taken for a legitimate pain problem. Consider these startling statistics:

- Prescription painkiller abuse costs employers over $40 billion annually because employees are less productive while at work or are not at work at all.
- Employees who abuse drugs are two to five times more likely to take unexcused absences, be late for work, quit or be fired within one year of employment, be involved in workplace incidents, and file workers' compensation claims.
- A recent report showed people covered by employer health insurance received $2.6 billion worth of treatment for opioid addiction and overdoses in 2016, up from $273 million in 2004.

Many people who have become addicted to opioids did not feel high when they took them, but did feel they:

- Had more energy.
- Were more confident.
- Were smarter.
- Were more relaxed.
- Were less depressed.

The effects of opioid medications can create serious risks at work. Your employees need to be clear on your workplace's policy regarding potential impairment from opioid prescription medications.

Opioids can negatively affect a person's ability to drive or operate heavy equipment. These drugs can also alter a person's judgment, create tremors, reduce muscle strength, impair coordination and cause confusion. Employers can and should:

- Educate employees and managers about the health and productivity issues related to prescription drug abuse.
- Educate employees and managers on the warning signs of abuse include:
    - thinking about taking more medication than is being currently

prescribed;
    - continuing to use opioids even when pain is no longer present; or
    - trying to access more painkiller medication from another source besides one’s physician.
- Incorporate information about substance abuse in workplace wellness programs or strategies.
- Offer health benefits that provide coverage for substance abuse disorders.
- Consider expanding your current drug-testing policy to include prescription drugs.
- Publicize drug-free workplace policies and incorporate guidelines regarding prescription drugs.
    - Research has shown that for types of pain related to common workplace injuries, including soft-tissue injuries and musculoskeletal problems, opioids are no more effective than non-opioid alternatives such as Tylenol, Advil, or generic ibuprofen.
    - Although opioids are widely prescribed for back injuries and chronic back pain, they should not be the first line of treatment.
    - Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs offer a more affordable and safer alternative to opioids.
- Provide employee assistance programs (EAPs), wellness, and work-life programs that include information and services related to substance abuse prevention, treatment, and return-to-work issues.
- Provide training to managers so they can recognize and respond to substance abuse issues and address problems in uniform, cost-effective and business-sensitive ways.

(The source of information in this column was the National Safety Council’s report entitled The Proactive Role Employers Can Take: Opioids in the Workplace.)