

Toolbox Safety Talks

Workplace drug and alcohol strategy

SafeWork SA

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Talk about safety at work

Take ten minutes at 10am, or at any other time of the day, to talk with your team about workplace safety. This training resource is designed to help you deliver short presentations covering a series of work health and safety topics.

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Here is an example of a transport incident.

A commercial vehicle driver travelling south from Marree died when his 16-tonne truck left the road before coming to a stop in a dry riverbed. The driver is understood to have been awake for a long period and it is believed he may have fallen asleep while driving. The forensic pathologist's report found evidence of alcohol and prescription medicine that contained a stimulant. The driver's journey was in the early hours of the morning, when fatigue is most likely to take effect. There was no flexible scheduling practice in place at work to enable him to sleep.

ASK THE QUESTION

What factors contributed to the incident?

Possible answers:

- *prescription drugs*
- *lack of sleep*
- *fatigue*
- *loss of concentration*
- *insufficient recovery times between shifts*
- *lack of information on use of alcohol and other drugs.*

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Why should workplaces have a drug and alcohol strategy?

A workplace drug and alcohol strategy clearly sets out how to address health and safety risks arising from people impaired by drugs and alcohol.

Having a drug and alcohol policy in place can help reduce the risk to everyone. Education and information should form part of every strategy. It's important that everyone at a workplace understands the effect that alcohol and other drugs may have on their ability to work safely.

Workplace health and safety is everyone's responsibility

Use of alcohol and other drugs becomes a work health and safety issue if a person's ability to exercise judgment, coordination, motor control, concentration and alertness in the workplace are impaired, leading to increased risk of injury or incidents to themselves or others. Co-workers may be placed in difficult situations, expected to cover unsafe work practices or be faced with reporting a fellow worker.

Impairment can be caused by a range of factors, including alcohol and other drug use. Other impairment factors may include fatigue, medical conditions, chemicals, heat, noise and symptoms of work-related stress. It should not be immediately assumed that impairment is caused by alcohol and/or other drug use.

A Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU) has a responsibility to ensure that, where a worker's capacity to work safely is impaired, the worker is not in a position of personal risk and does not present a hazard or risk to the health and safety of others. Responding to a workplace hazard or risk caused by alcohol and/or other drugs may also include situations where clients, customers or visitors enter the workplace or workers visit clients at other sites. Where the conduct or presence of visitors or clients is hazardous in the workplace, they may be directed to leave immediately by the PCBU, by any other person who has management and control of a workplace, or indeed by anyone who feels threatened.

Our personal responsibility for health and safety in the workplace is complementary to the PCBU's duty and we need to be supported with adequate information, instruction, training and supervision to fulfil it. We must all take reasonable care of our own health and safety, and not endanger the health and safety of others in the workplace. The consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs while at work is unacceptable. We should present for work and remain, while at work, capable of performing our duties safely.

At some workplaces, the hazards associated with alcohol and other drugs may vary due to the nature of the workplace. Even when people return a zero alcohol or drug level, they may still be impaired. 'Hangover' effects can endure beyond the direct presence of the drug and create risks.

The risks at every workplace must be assessed individually. Hazards or risk factors to consider in relation to injury or harm if people are impaired by alcohol and/or other drugs include:

- operation of machinery
- driving in the course of work
- situations where concentration or motor coordination is relied on to carry out a job
- use of hazardous substances
- performing duties as part of a team.

Risk factors to consider when assessing whether risks exist or may arise from alcohol and other drugs include:

- **Patterns of alcohol and/or other drug consumption** – people who use large amounts on single occasions may create different risks compared to people who are regular heavy users.
- **Type of workplace culture** – for example, do we encourage people to drink after work finishes?
- **Availability of alcohol and/or other drugs** – at some workplaces, workers are more likely to be exposed to usage, so the risk of them being impaired may increase. In other workplaces, they may be more exposed to the consequences. For example, workers in the hospitality industry may be more at risk of harm from non-workers impaired by alcohol.
- **Isolation from family and friends** – workers in isolated areas or who are separated from family and friends sometimes report that they are more likely to consume alcohol and/or other drugs due to boredom, loneliness or lack of social activities.
- **Inadequate job design and training** – unrealistic performance targets and deadlines, excessive responsibility, monotonous work or low job satisfaction may, in some instances, be risk factors. Inadequate training, supervision and communication may also contribute to this risk factor.

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- **Levels of supervision** – inadequate supervision and communication about expected roles and behaviour on the job, and the consequences of unacceptable behaviour, may be a risk factor.
- **Extended working hours or shift work** – illicit drugs, such as amphetamines, or prescription medication may be taken to keep awake.
- **Interpersonal factors** – for example, bullying at work may increase risks.
- **Working conditions** – hot or dangerous environments may contribute to alcohol and/or other drug taking.

If a risk assessment suggests a level of risk, controls need to be introduced to eliminate or reduce them. Except for alcohol testing, a positive drug test is not directly related to impairment nor does it provide a reliable indicator of impairment. It only detects whether somebody has been exposed to drugs.

Impairment tests, also known as 'fitness for work' or 'fitness for duty' testing systems, measure actual impairment rather than the existence of drugs or drug by-products in the system. PCBU's in Australia are already using impairment testing as an alternative to, or in conjunction with, alcohol and other drug testing at the workplace. As with drug testing, such testing has limits and should be part of a comprehensive workplace strategy that includes education, policy and procedures.

ASK THE QUESTION

Before I finish, is there anything that we could be doing in this workplace to address the issue of drugs and alcohol?

Take notes about suggestions ... don't panic if there aren't any takers!

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OK, unless anyone has any questions, thanks for participating.