

Alcohol and drugs in the workplace

The impact of alcohol and drugs on the workplace

The use of alcohol and other drugs can impact on workplaces in a number of ways, including affecting relationships, safety and productivity.

The following statistics demonstrate the extent of this impact in Australia:

- Alcohol and other drugs cost Australian workplaces an estimated \$6 billion per year in lost productivity.
- Half of Australian workers drink at harmful levels, 13% use cannabis and 4% use amphetamines.
- One in 10 workers says they have experienced the negative effects associated with a co-worker's misuse of alcohol. The negative effects include reduced ability to do your job, involved in an accident or close call, worked extra hours to cover for a co-worker, and took at least one day off work.

How do hangovers and coming down affect work?

Having a hangover or coming down from drugs at work can be just as problematic as being intoxicated. Headaches, blurred vision, irritability, problems concentrating, lost voice and extreme tiredness can all create problems for you and your co-workers.

Alcohol

Sobering up takes time. As a guide, an average person in good health can process one standard drink per hour.

Hangover cures like cold showers, doing exercise, strong coffee or being sick will not speed up the process. These cures may make you feel better, but they don't change your blood alcohol concentration (BAC).

Other drugs

It can take several days to come down from other drugs like ecstasy, ice and amphetamines, so using these drugs on the weekend can still affect your work.

Do prescription drugs affect work?

There is always a level of risk when using any drug including prescription or over-the-counter medications.

Drug reactions vary from person to person. If you are taking a drug you haven't had before, you won't know how it will affect you. It's important to follow your doctor's advice when taking prescription drugs and discuss any side-effects and how this might impact on your work.

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The effects of prescription drugs such as benzodiazepines (e.g. Xanax®) can have an impact on your work and you should discuss these with your doctor. Long term use in particular may become problematic.

What is an alcohol or drug problem?

An alcohol or drug problem isn't necessarily measured by how much, how many or what type of drugs a person uses, but by how the drug affects the person's life and the lives of those around them. It's often a matter of personal perception.

Here are some examples of a drug problem:

- Regularly returning from lunch a bit tipsy, then disturbing everyone in the office and making it harder for them to work.
- Taking prescription medication for a long time, which causes memory problems, clumsiness and tiredness.
- Often taking ecstasy or drinking alcohol heavily on the weekend and then coming into work tired, irritable and moody the next day.

Concerned about a co-worker?

If a co-worker's use of alcohol or other drugs is affecting you then they do have a drug problem. This person may not be aware their drug use is affecting those around them, so you need to talk to them or the most appropriate person in your organisation such as a manager or someone from human resources.

Find out the facts

If you are concerned that a co-worker is intoxicated while at work, it is important to be very sure that the person is actually under the influence of drugs – and not unwell – before you take any further action. It is very difficult to know if someone is impaired by the use of drugs or if someone is misusing them. Read through the drug facts pages to find out about the effects of different drugs.

If you are concerned that a co-worker's drug use is affecting their work and/or the safety of others, it would be helpful to document evidence of incidents.

Speak up

If your workplace has an alcohol and drug policy, follow the procedures outlined in that document.

If your workplace does not have an alcohol policy you may wish to discuss the issue with:

- Your health and safety representative
- A member of the health and safety or other formal workplace committee
- A manager, supervisor or employer

If you choose to talk to your co-worker directly about your concerns, there is no easy way to begin the conversation. The following suggestions may help:

- Talk to a counsellor, health professional or your workplace's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for advice on how to handle the situation.
- Speak to a manager or supervisor about your concerns and seek their advice (you do not need to identify the co-worker).

- It may be best to talk to the person away from the workplace and outside of working hours.
- Explain how the person's use of alcohol is affecting you and other people around them at work. Give concrete examples.
- Try to remain calm and logical and stick to the point – refuse to be drawn into an argument.
- Offer your support and encourage them to seek professional help. Provide them with information about available services (see below 'Further information').

Employee responsibilities

It's important to consider how your use of alcohol or drugs may impact on your co-workers because the OHS Act imposes a duty on all workers not to recklessly endanger any other person in workplaces.

Different industries and workplaces may have more specific rights and responsibilities for employers and employees detailed in a policy. For example, some industries and workplaces may require people driving vehicles to have a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.00. Others may have policies about testing employees for alcohol.

Make sure you are aware of your rights and responsibilities around alcohol within your workplace and/or industry.

Employer responsibilities

Your employer has a legal obligation to address alcohol and other drug issues in the workplace through the 'duty of care' provisions in the OHS Act. These provisions require employers to take all reasonable or 'practicable' steps to ensure the health and safety of all workers and any other people who may be affected by the actions of the employer, such as contractors or clients.

The Australian Drug Foundation works with employers to help them develop alcohol and drugs policies, train employees about alcohol and drugs, and organise safe parties. If you think your workplace could benefit from these services, put your manager or human resources department in contact with the Australian Drug Foundation's Workplace Services.

Further information

Australian Drug Foundation's Workplace Services team: Tel. 03 9611 6100 or visit www.adf.org.au/workplace

Unions: If you are in a union, you should contact them for assistance.

WorkSafe Victoria Advisory Service: Tel. 1800 136 089 (toll free).

Your local doctor, other health professional, or workplace Employee Assistance Program should be able to provide you with confidential advice or refer you to a more appropriate service.

DirectLine is a 24-hour telephone counselling and referral service for people in Victoria wanting help with alcohol or other drug related issues. Tel. 1800 888 236.

CounsellingOnline offers free alcohol and drug counselling online 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Visit www.counsellingonline.org.au.

Workers' Occupational Health Centre is a medical centre for workers located in Melbourne, Victoria. Visit www.wohc.org.au or tel. 03 9662 4820.

Further Information

The Druginfo website has information on:

- Help & support services
- Safe partying for all ages
- Links to related articles
- References for this fact sheet

Go to druginfo.adf.org.au

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