



Characteristics, Effects, and Symptoms of Alcohol and Controlled Substance Use

I. Effects of Drugs

A. Performance Indicators of Substance Abuse

The first indicators of drug use are usually changes in general performance and such behavior, such as deterioration in productivity, quality of work, and attitude. However, these indicators may erroneously point to substance abuse because they are similar to the effects of non-drug-related problems such as job stress, overwork, fatigue, or emotional problems. Moreover, non-drug-related problems may be compounded by drug use. Thus, it is critical that employees and supervisors be trained to recognize the various signs and symptoms as well as their limitations as indicators of drug use.

B. General Indicators

The following are general indicators of substance abuse:

Absenteeism: Tardiness or excessive use of sick leave may be observed. Drug and alcohol affected employees are absent an average of two to three times more than the non-drug-using employees.

Steady turnover: Chemically dependent people have disorganized lives. Many quit rather than face detection. Others transfer or are fired for poor and unsafe performance.

Lower Productivity: Studies have shown drug and alcohol affected employees perform at about two-thirds of their actual work potential. Thus, any change in productivity not attributed to other factors may be suspect.

Equipment breakdown: Substance-abusing employees often do not adequately maintain their vehicles and/or tools, because they either lose interest in their jobs, or look forward to having their equipment declared out of service as a means to avoid work.

Poor quality work: Shoddy work, rework, and material waste may be evident. In drivers, decreased mental and physical agility and concentration caused by

substance abuse could result in greater numbers of general traffic violations, more traffic accidents, increases in equipment damage, incomplete or missing paperwork.

Poor Morale: Chronic drug abuse often creates wide mood swings, anxiety, depression, and anger. Non-drug-using employees often see drug abusers as poor team workers and safety hazards.

Increase accidents and near misses: Impaired employees are 3.6 times more likely to be involved in an accident. Even small quantities of drugs in the system, as well as the hangover effect, can cause a deterioration of alertness, clear-mindedness, and reaction time.

Theft of equipment and materials: Drugs are expensive. Coinciding with a drug abusers' need for money is the distortion of their value systems and judgment caused by the drug. These changes erode their loyalty and dedication to their employers.

Observing these indicators may be complicated because drug and alcohol abusing employees often develop survival skills to make recognition more difficult. Initially, these performance indicators are best addressed through the routine performance monitoring and correction process. Typically, a supervisor may confront an employee regarding job performance. This confrontation is based on objectives, documented information related to performance deterioration, not the specific signs of substance abuse.

C. Specific Observable (Physical) Evidence of Use

Signs and symptoms pointing directly to serious substance abuse include but are not limited to the following:

Paraphernalia: Needles, balloons, aluminum foil wrappers, snorting tools, marijuana smoking pipes and holders, and drug containers (not used for legitimate purposes).

Presence of drugs: Plastic sandwich bags of marijuana, small containers of tablets or capsules, vials or envelopes of powder, or empty beer, wine and liquor bottles/containers.

D. General Physical and Mental Effects of Drug Use

The physical and mental effects of substance abuse occur not only during intoxication (from under one hour to 24 hours after intake), but also show up in residual hangovers, fatigue rebounds, and mental impairment.

Other physical and mental effects may include:

- Slow reactions
- Poor memory

- Poor coordination
- Loss of concentration
- Fatigue
- Depression or anxiety
- Delayed decision making
- Difficulty in sorting out priority tasks
- Erratic judgment
- Confusion
- Neurotic or psychotic behavior
- Learning difficulty
- Paranoia
- Odor of the drug
- Inconsistent environmental pupil sizes

E. Behavioral Signs of Substance Abuse

General performance or behavior problems with an employee may indicate the involvement of drug or alcohol use. Examples of such behavior include:

- A sudden change, usually for the worse, in attitude, work performance or behavior
- Wanting to be alone, avoiding non-substance-abusing workers
- A “lackadaisical” or “I don’t care” attitude
- Forgetfulness, indecision, and erratic judgment
- Impulsive and temperamental behavior
- Deteriorating or erratic performance
- Changes in personal appearance and hygiene
- Hangover symptoms
- Jitters, hand tremors, hyper excitability
- Drug culture slang/verbiage
- Carelessness
- Secretive behavior
- Sleeping on the job

Each symptom, by itself, may point to problems other than drug abuse. But, when a pattern begins to develop, the supervisor or manager needs to be alert and act quickly. When fueled by drug or alcohol abuse, these behaviors can lead to greater absenteeism, higher operating costs, serious production problems, and definite increase in accidents and health care costs.

F. Physical Symptoms of Substance Abuse

Observable physical signs and symptoms usually are not apparent until the employee’s abuse of drugs or alcohol has reached an advanced level. At advanced stages of drug

use, the employee is less able to disguise the physical indicators, and often becomes careless because of a clouded mental state. Specific signs include:

- Observable consistent puncture wounds/injection sites on the body (indicating intravenous needle use)
- Racing heart, irregular rhythms (cocaine and amphetamines often cause the heart to react unpredictably)
- Bloodshot or watery eyes
- Runny nose or sores around nostrils/frequent nosebleeds (caused by chronic snorting of cocaine)
- Changes in speech (e.g., slowed, slurred, or incoherent)
- Slow reactions
- Hand tremors
- Unsteady gait
- Intoxicated behavior (e.g., swaying, staggering, slurred speech)
- Very large or small pupil (narcotics and depressants will cause the pupils to constrict; cocaine and amphetamines will cause the pupils to dilate)
- Odor of alcohol on breath
- Odor of marijuana smoke
- Poor coordination

G. Common Job Sites Where Drugs Are Used

Drug users tend to frequent certain job sites which either allow for the privacy necessary to prevent detection, or the anonymity which may be provided by the cover of a crowded area.

Some common areas include:

- Lunchroom or lounge area
- Equipment or storage rooms
- Parking lots, cars, and other vehicles
- Restrooms
- Remote area of the worksites

II. **Effects of Alcohol**

Because of its widespread acceptance as a social and legal drug, alcohol has the distinction of being the most frequently abused drug in America.

A. Psychological Effects:

- Can be psychologically/physically addicting;
- Reduced inhibitions which can lead to aggressive behavior;
- Euphoria, tranquility, and inappropriate emotional response;
- Emotional instability and changes in personality;
- Chronic use can cause depression;
- Altered perception;
- Increases in confidence, but decreases in judgment.

B. Physical Effects:

- Inhibits coordination;
- Stumbling and staggering gait;
- Drowsy, trancelike state;
- Slowed speech and body movements.

Because depresses the central nervous system, high doses may be lethal as a result of the person simply ceasing to breathe. The more common "hangover" increases absenteeism and decreases productivity.