

What is addiction?

Substance use disorders (SUDs) can happen to anyone, regardless of their race, gender, age, economic status, job title, intelligence, or location. Addiction often begins in benign ways, such as legally-prescribed prescriptions after an illness or injury, or to treat depression or anxiety. In some cases, drug and alcohol use can escalate and a person can quickly lose control.

Common signs and symptoms of addiction

Addiction is characterized by:

- Frequent absenteeism
- Declining work performance or quality
- Financial struggles
- Physical signs such as changes in weight, dental issues, flu-like symptoms, and frequent pain
- Erratic or unpredictable behavior
- Decline in hygiene or appearance

Substance abuse impacts users' physical health, psychological health, relationships with family and friends, financial stability, and can lead to legal issues. SUDs can also increase costs for employers by increasing health care costs and absenteeism, as well as **reducing workplace productivity, performance, morale, and safety.**

Top contributors to risk of drug and alcohol misuse

- Loneliness
- Work Stressors
- Long hours
- Competition at work
- Pain

Source: [American Addiction Centers](#)

Substance abuse increased since the pandemic

A 2021 Mental Health Index report found that more than **one quarter (29 percent)** of Americans that use drugs report an increase in drug use since the onset of the pandemic, and **31 percent** of alcohol users have **increased their consumption** in this time. Six percent of alcohol users consume 15 or more drinks per week compared to 2% in the pre-2020 benchmark.

People who use medications more than prescribed are **more than five times more likely to report difficulty completing job-related tasks and responsibilities** at least once per week than those who use their medication as prescribed.

Source: [The Mental Health Index report \(TELUS Health\)](#)

\$35 B

On average, substance use disorders cost employer-sponsored healthcare programs more than **\$35 billion** per year.

Source: [JAMA Network](#)



More than a quarter (26 percent) of drug and alcohol users surveyed reported that their drug or alcohol use has had a **negative impact on their job**

Source: [The Mental Health Index report \(TELUS Health\)](#)

\$8,500

Employers stand to **save an average of \$8,500** for supporting each employee in **recovery** from a substance use disorder

Source: [NORC](#)

Long working hours may be linked to increased use of alcohol, research suggests. Workers who log over 48 hours of work every week have an 11% greater chance of engaging in risky drinking than workers who perform the standard 40 hours of work a week.

Source: [National Institutes of Health \(NIH\)](#)

Employer Responsibility

Substance use conditions can qualify as medical conditions that meet the requirements for protection under the **Americans with Disability Act**, so employers cannot discriminate against employees based on a diagnosis (or even a perception) of a substance use condition. However, **employers do not have to accept behaviors that are incompatible with their Drug-Free Workplace or other conduct policies.** While an employee **cannot be terminated solely because they have a substance use condition**, an employee can be terminated for things such as using on the job or being too hungover to perform their duties.

What MANAGERS can do...

- Help to **reduce the stigma** around addiction
- **Offer treatment** as part of your employee benefits program
- **Recognize the warning signs** of addiction
- Make employees **aware of resources**
- **Understand how to have a supportive conversation** with the employee once a substance use issue is suspected

Source: *How To Help Employees Who Have a Substance Use Disorder (Allstate Benefits)*

What ORGANIZATIONS can do...

- **Publish a policy statement** to notify employees that it is unlawful to manufacture, distribute, dispense, possess or use a controlled substance and that such action is prohibited in the workplace. The statement must include information to advise employees that violations will have consequences.
- **Establish a drug-free awareness program** to inform employees of the dangers of workplace substance use and outline the resources available to employees such as an EAP.
- **Require employees to notify the organization** of any criminal drug convictions while employed at the company.
- **The organization must then notify the federal government** of such violations and take appropriate actions with the offending employee.
- **Offer a strong health insurance plan** that includes comprehensive coverage for substance use disorders including behavioral health treatments, mental and behavioral inpatient treatments, and substance use disorder treatment.

NALOXONE

Adding **naloxone** to first-aid supplies in the workplace can be part of an employer's strategic health and safety plan, but employers should consider the benefits and risks before making a decision.

Naloxone is a medication that **can save lives by reversing an overdose from opioids** such as heroin, fentanyl, morphine or oxycodone.

In March 2023, the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved Narcan**, a brand-name naloxone nasal spray, for over-the-counter, nonprescription use. Because of the relatively easy administration of Narcan and its potential for saving lives, some employers are choosing to keep the medication on hand in the workplace.

More than one-quarter (26 percent) of people acknowledging an alcohol or drug problem report that their employer provides resources to help with problem drinking or drug use. Forty-four percent either do not know whether their employer offers any resources or are not sure what is offered.

Source: *Areas of Worklife Scale (AWS)*



Workers in recovery miss 13.7 fewer days each year than workers with an untreated SUD, and 3.6 less days than an average employee.

Source: *NORC*

Employee assistance programs, originally developed in the 1970s to address alcohol and drug problems among workers, have been shown to decrease absenteeism, turnover and medical claims.



Source: *National Institutes of Health (NIH)*

Additional resources

- Drug-Free Workplace Toolkit (SAMHSA)
- Drug Free America Foundation
- How to Develop Drug Policy
- Should employers keep naloxone in the workplace? (SHRM)
- Companies Are Slowly Addressing Employees' Substance Use Disorders (SHRM)
- Substance Use Cost Calculator (NSC)
- How companies can support employees with substance dependencies (BenefitsPro)