



Common drugs – effects and their impact on the workplace

It's no surprise that drug and alcohol use in the workplace can have a negative impact, putting workers at risk of injury or worse, and meaning that employers are failing in their duty of care.

As more companies implement drug and alcohol testing programs, the decision of when to test will be raised. Random sampling is an equitable and common sense approach, but what if there is reasonable suspicion that an individual is under the influence – what are the warning signs and how do you identify them? Understanding the effects of common drugs and their potential impact on the workplace allows business owners and managers to better plan for the safety of all employees.

Drugs defined

By very definition, drugs alter the body's function in some way - be it physically, psychologically or a combination of both.

Psychoactive drugs affect the body's central nervous system and therefore alter mood, thinking and behaviours.

They are commonly divided into four categories;

1. Depressants - depressants decrease alertness by slowing down the central nervous system. Heroin, alcohol and analgesics are all depressant drugs.
2. Stimulants – drugs in this category increase the body's state of arousal by increasing brain activity. Examples are caffeine, nicotine, cocaine and amphetamines including ice and speed.
3. Hallucinogens – hallucinogens alter the user's perception and cause them to see or hear things that are not there. Common types include LSD (acid) and magic mushrooms.
4. Other – these drugs incorporate qualities of more than one of the first three types listed above. Cannabis falls into this category as it exhibits depressive, hallucinogenic and some stimulant properties.

Even within each of these generalised drug groups, users can inhibit vastly different effects post-usage and this will also vary according to a number of additional factors including; their own physical attributes, previous experience with the drug, prevalent state of mind, the chemical make-up of the drug itself, and the user's surroundings and external influences including other people.

Effects and their impact

Some illicit substances are erroneously regarded as 'less harmful' and therefore more widely tolerated. The truth is that anything which causes impairment of judgement or physical response should be seen as potentially damaging to the workplace.

Cannabis

Cannabis is often seen as a 'soft' drug and it tends to be widely accepted in social circles. The National Drug Strategy Household Survey (2013) found that over 35% of Australians had used cannabis in their lifetime, with 10% claiming use within the last three months.

The active ingredient in cannabis is Delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which affects mood and perception. The presence of THC in the brain releases dopamine, which is a naturally occurring 'feel good' chemical and this, in turn, leads to increased feelings of well-being.

The cannabis plant provides leaves and flowers, which are generally dried and smoked. In addition, hashish and hashish oil are extracted from the flowers of a cannabis plant and are both more potent forms of the drug. Cannabis can also be added to food and ingested.

The strength of all forms of cannabis varies from plant to plant, influencing the effect on the user. There has been little research into potency (the amount of THC present), which has a direct impact on the effect of the drug.

Common effects immediately after use include; an inability to concentrate, impaired balance, slower reflexes, confusion, loss of inhibition, increased appetite and increased heart-rate. These effects can last for up to five-hours post-use. THC also impacts on the brain's ability to form new memories, so users may not easily recall events occurring during their 'high'. Cannabis use causes blood vessels to expand or dilate, meaning that users often have bloodshot eyes.

Long-term use has been linked to respiratory illness, dependence and decreases in concentration, motivation, memory and learning ability. Research also suggests that it can exacerbate schizophrenia and bipolar disorder in individuals with a vulnerability to these conditions and users can often exhibit anxiety, depression, paranoia and psychosis, all

of which challenge the view that cannabis is a harmless, social substance.

Amphetamines

The impact of stimulant drugs, including amphetamines and methamphetamines such as speed, ice or cocaine, is even more pronounced. Again, potency will impact heavily on the user's reaction and, as with cannabis, there is little way to determine potency levels prior to use. The method of consumption will also determine the individual reaction. Amphetamines can be smoked, swallowed, snorted or injected, each of which affects the body in different ways.

Regardless of the method, the body's physical response is almost instant. Short-term effects include increased energy, alertness and talkativeness. Blood pressure, breathing and pulse-rates all increase and the user will usually display higher levels of confidence. Amphetamines cause a reduction in appetite, an inability to sleep and users will often appear hyperactive.

Some forms of the drug (notably methamphetamines such as ice) can cause anxiety, irritability, paranoia or heightened suspicion levels, panic attacks and even threatening or violent behaviours which the user does not recall at a later date.

The immediate and pronounced physical responses to stimulant drugs can quickly lead to serious consequences including seizures, strokes or heart failure. Amphetamine users will often attempt to counteract the effects through use of depressant drugs (such as alcohol or prescription drugs), to facilitate sleep, leading to a dangerous path of poly-drug use.

The unpredictability of behaviour associated with stimulant use makes these drugs particularly impactful on a workplace.

Aside from the obvious problem associated with machinery operation or any other physical task, the tendency toward violence puts every worker at unnecessary risk of abuse.

Research conducted by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and released in February shows that the number of ice-addicted Australians aged 15 to 24 has tripled over the last four years. Anecdotal evidence suggests that use of the drugs starts out

socially and quickly escalates, making it a particular concern for businesses that employ younger people.

Ecstasy

While commonly seen as 'party' drug, ecstasy contains both stimulant and hallucinogenic properties. The active ingredient is methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), which is often mixed with other substances including ketamine, caffeine or aspirin.

Ecstasy is commonly ingested in capsule or tablet form and the effects can last for up to six hours. The effect on the user will vary according to the chemical make-up of the drug, which is generally unknown, meaning responses can be unpredictable.

It will generally cause heightened feelings of well-being combined with increased confidence. Physiologically, the user will experience increased pulse rate and blood pressure, hot and cold flushes, sweating and sometimes nausea. Dilated pupils are often a sign of use and users may additionally feel anxious, tend to clench their jaw and grind their teeth and find it difficult to concentrate. The dehydrating and overheating effects can lead to muscle meltdown and users are susceptible to complete cell structure breakdown through excessive water consumption.

Poly-drug use is common among those who take ecstasy, as users attempt to counteract common effects including sleeplessness and anxiety.

Heroin

Heroin belongs to the opioid family and has a depressant effect on the body. Users will commonly inject the drug, although it can also be smoked or snorted. The effects of low doses include shallow breathing, nausea and vomiting, sleeplessness, loss of balance, co-ordination and concentration, as well as an increased feeling of well-being. The depressant properties of the drug cause decreased heart and breathing rates which can easily lead to more serious conditions including coma or death.

High-functioning heroin users are often able to continue performing duties, although irregularities in both the strength and content of heroin, along with the dependent nature of the drug, make users particularly susceptible to overdose or worse.

When it comes to the workplace, 'safe' drugs don't exist

When it comes to the workplace, there is no such thing as 'safe' or 'social' drug usage. Even seemingly harmless, or socially tolerated, drugs can have a detrimental impact of the safety of workers.

Of equal concern are findings by the Federal Department of Health from research conducted in 2009, which identified that many Australian drug users claim to partake in order to achieve specific tasks in their employment. This was found to be particularly true in the case of amphetamine use in occupations and industries including construction, mining, labouring and other trades.

These flawed beliefs and attitudes combine to normalise drug use in relation to employment, suggesting that the potential for impact is negligible, when clearly the opposite is true. Employers are duty-bound to provide a safe work environment for all staff and understanding the effects of common drugs and their potential for impact on workplace safety should be regarded an integral part of that process.

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Drug	Common effects – immediate	Common effects – long-term
Cannabis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Lack of concentration › Impaired balance › Slower reflexes › Confusion › Loss of inhibition › Increased appetite › Increased heart rate › Red eyes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Respiratory illness › Decreased concentration › Decreased motivation › Reduced memory and learning › Anxiety › Depression › Paranoia › Psychosis › Can trigger more severe mental disorders in those vulnerable
Amphetamines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Increased energy, alertness and talkativeness › Heightened blood pressure, heart and breathing rates › Loss of appetite › Inability to sleep › Dilated pupils › Increased confidence › Can trigger anxiety, irritability, paranoia, panic attacks and threatening behavior's 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Long-term use can lead to serious consequences including seizures, strokes and heart failure › Often encourages poly-drug use in order to counteract the effects
Ecstasy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Increased confidence and feelings of well-being › Dilated pupils › Jaw clenching › Hot and cold flushes › Sweating › Nausea › Inability to concentrate › Dehydration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Anxiety › Paranoia › Often encourages poly-drug use in order to counteract the effects
Heroin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Shallow breathing › Nausea › Vomiting › Sleeplessness › Loss of balance › Decreased coordination and concentration levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Dependence › Overdose › Death