Understanding Opioid Addiction: How to Support the Road to Recovery

EMPLOYEES HAVE A HIGHER CHANCE OF SUCCESS WITH EMPLOYER-PROVIDED HELP

The opioid crisis continues to make headlines. While cocaine and heroin use remain prevalent, the synthetic opioid fentanyl, originally prescribed to cancer patients, is overtaking both in drug overdose deaths. North Carolina, which has been hit particularly hard by the opioid crisis, saw a 23 percent increase in opioid-related overdose deaths in 2017, the second-highest rate increase in the U.S. in that time period.

But with education, awareness and better pain treatment options, recovery is possible for many, especially those who are employed. According to addiction specialists, companies with successful employee assistance programs report better morale and productivity, with accompanying decreases in absenteeism, downtime, turnover and theft.

**How opioid addiction affects the workplace**

Until recently, opioids were prescribed to 52 to 80 percent of injured workers who received any form of pain medication. While managing pain due to a workplace injury is important, addiction to painkillers can be devastating to one’s personal and professional life. The average worker misses 10 days per year due to illness, but workers using heroin or misusing pain medication miss nearly three times as many — 29 days of work per year — on average.

However, what’s not commonly known is that workers in recovery who have received substance use treatment miss the fewest days of any group, even the general workforce.
For this reason and others, employers can be encouraged that workplace-supported recovery for workers struggling with opioid addiction can be successful without impacting their bottom line and productivity.

**What can employers do?**

There are many actions that employers can take to ensure workers have the best chance at recovery.

1. **Train staff to spot the signs**

Employers should make sure that supervisors, managers and HR staff are trained to recognize signs of addiction in employees, including:

- Unexpected and frequent absenteeism
- Complaints or outward signs of fatigue and flu-like symptoms (runny nose, teary eyes, chills, sweats, muscle aches and headaches)
- Frequent bathroom visits due to opioid-related GI distress
- Depressed mood

Although these symptoms can indicate other illnesses, it’s the combination of “unusual and persistent” changes in the employee’s demeanor, mood or behavior that sets opioid addiction apart, says William F. Wright, MD, at Atrium Health.

2. **Learn what addiction recovery looks like**

Dr. Wright compares opioid addiction to any other serious illness that, with treatment, can ultimately result in workers leading normal, healthy lives.

“When we describe addiction and substance use disorders, we classify it as a remitting and relapsing disease,” Dr. Wright explains. “It’s very similar to cancer – we can have cancers in remission for a while, and then sometimes, for no real good reason, they relapse. Same thing with addiction.”

According to Dr. Wright, it’s important to remember that substance use disorder is a serious — and involuntary — medical condition.

---

**Who is at risk for opioid addiction?**

Workers in some industries are more prone to opioid addiction than others due to the incidence and types of injuries. Overdose deaths were highest in construction, mining, oil and gas production, food preparation and healthcare, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.⁶

And while anyone can become addicted to opioids, some individuals are more vulnerable, says Dr. Wright, who specializes in addiction psychiatry at Atrium Health. “Sometimes it’s genetics, some of it is situational and stressors,” Dr. Wright explains. “But there is a biological basis that drives how the brain thinks and behaves, and how it responds to certain things.”
“You wouldn’t just fire one of your diabetic employees because they started having problems and had a hypoglycemic episode at work,” Dr. Wright says. “It isn’t that easy to just stop. It’s not anything that the individual asked for, and until they get into treatment, it’s really hard to get better.”

Opioid addiction is especially tricky to treat because of how it alters the reward centers of the brain that drive behavior. “It’s just like when you have the drive to drink water because you’re thirsty,” Dr. Wright explains. “If you were to think about that water and continue to think about it and yet not have it, imagine the lengths you’d go to get it. Eventually, you would be surprised at what you would do.”

Dr. Wright says that recovery is a biological process that varies from person to person. “As lay individuals, we think, okay, it’s just a choice. If addiction is that much of a big problem, just stop using. Just put down the alcohol, put down the pills,” Dr. Wright says. “If it were that easy of a choice, obviously, we wouldn’t be having this epidemic and the issues with substances all across the board.”

3. Help workers get the support they need

Encourage employees to seek treatment through their healthcare provider and ensure addiction resources, such as employee assistance programs (EAPs), are readily available. Atrium Health’s EAP offers confidential services for employees to use at any time, providing a wealth of free information and vetted resources for opioid addiction treatment and recovery.

In addition, to prevent addiction, Atrium Health’s healthcare providers and pharmacy benefit managers have changed how they address pain in injured workers by:

- Ensuring that alternatives to pain medications, such as physical therapy and acupuncture, are included in treatment.
- Prescribing nonnarcotic medications first, such as a combination of acetaminophen and ibuprofen.
- Approving only a limited supply (five days in North Carolina) if opioids are deemed absolutely necessary.
- Checking state-controlled substance-monitoring databases, such as the North Carolina Controlled Substance Reporting System before prescribing a narcotic.
- Requiring high-using opioid patients to use a single pharmacy or physician for prescription approvals.

Another critical part of supporting worker recovery is communication, Dr. Wright says. If possible, try to keep the lines of communication open with the worker’s family to ensure ongoing support outside the workplace.

“When we describe addiction and substance use disorders, we classify it as a remitting and relapsing disease. It’s very similar to cancer – we can have cancers in remission for a while, and then sometimes, for no real good reason, they relapse. Same thing with addiction.”

— William F. Wright
MD, specialist in addiction psychiatry at Atrium Health
“Having family and employers who know that recovery is a journey is key,” Dr. Wright says. “It’s not just going to be a ‘one and done.’ We’re going to need to be mindful that recovery is going to take longer than just four or five days to really help somebody.”

Good workers are worth fighting for
Although the road to recovery can be bumpy, it’s worthwhile for workers and employers alike. “As an employer, you have spent a lot of both time and money invested in that worker, in their job and in training them,” Dr. Wright says. “If they are an employee who’s been doing excellent work, you don’t want to lose that.”

According to the Center for American Progress, it costs employers an average of 21 percent of a worker’s annual salary to recruit and train a replacement. Costs are greater for workers with more education and training, and lower for workers who earn less and work in lower-skilled industries. Interestingly, workers in recovery are the least likely to leave their employers, with a turnover rate that is lower than that of workers with no current or prior substance use issues.

And returning to work is an important part of recovery. “When people go back to work, they’re happier and more productive,” Dr. Wright says. With their employer’s support, in addition to the support of friends and family, employees have the greatest chance of overcoming addiction and returning to a normal life.

Find out more about Atrium Health’s services for substance use disorders at AtriumHealth.org. Those who are battling addiction can learn more at Atrium Health’s Hope for Addiction page.

2. www.wfae.org/post/ncs-surge-rate-drug-overdose-deaths-second-highest-us#stream/0
3. www.hazeldenbettyford.org/articles/workplace-addiction-help
5. www.nsc.org/work-safety/safety-topics/drugs-at-work/costs-for-employers
8. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5671784/