

OPIOIDS IN THE WORKPLACE

What are opioids?

Opioids are drugs/medicines that are primarily prescribed to reduce and relieve acute or chronic pain by acting on specific nerve cells in the spinal cord and brain. Doctors may prescribe them for:

- Acute (short term) moderate to severe pain
- Chronic (long term pain)
- Moderate to severe diarrhea
- Moderate to severe cough

Prescription opioids come in various forms such as syrups, tablets, capsules, nasal sprays, skin patches, suppositories and liquids for injection. The common names are:

- Codeine
- Fentanyl
- Morphine
- Oxycodone
- Hydromorphone
- Medical heroin

One of the most common reasons given in North America for seeking health care is pain. A 2012 review indicated that between 15 - 20 percent of Canadians experience chronic pain, with limited access to appropriate and timely treatment: 50% have had to wait six or more months and many areas of Canada do not have any specialist pain treatment services.¹

In Canada, the main reason for opioids being prescribed is pain, with seniors and injured workers being the primary recipients of the pain killers. Canada is the world's second largest consumer of prescription opioids per capita after Americans. Our opioid use is highest amongst seniors; and the numbers are rising.

"We doubt very much that it has to do with Canadians being different, having more pain than people elsewhere in the world. We think it probably has to do with how we've been programmed to prescribe," says Dr. Jaime Meuser, executive director of professional development and practice for the College of Family Physicians of Canada.

In fact, 2017 report found that in the year 2015-2016, about one out of every seven people in Ontario (almost two million individuals) filled an opioid prescription.

When opioids are used as prescribed, they are effective pain killers. However, they can also induce a feeling of euphoria which can then lead to the misuse of the drug.



Opioids and Workplace Injuries

If someone is being treated with opioids for a workplace injury there are things that need to be considered.

Employers and the W.S.I.B. want early and safe return to work as soon as possible, while workers and Unions want to ensure returning to work is safe and suitable. But, secondary conditions can develop from misuse or even proper use of the drugs (i.e. stomach related ailments).

Apart from the addictive factor, high dose opioids can cause:

- Drowsiness
- Respiratory depression
- Coma
- Death
- Nausea/vomiting
- Constipation

- Mood changes
- Loss of appetite
- Sweating
- Risk of sleep apnea
- Physical dependence
- Headaches, dizziness, and confusion

Due to the risk of misuse, overdose and addiction, alternative treatments and therapies are often recommended. These include but aren't limited to:

- Non-opioid pharmacotherapy (e.g. nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs)
- Chiropractor
- Psychologists
- Medical Cannabis/Marijuana

What do workers, employers and unions need to consider?

Most prescription opioids are classified as Schedule 1 drugs under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. Their use is legal when prescribed by a licensed practitioner, and used by the person for whom they were prescribed. However, overuse of these drugs can impair an employee's ability to do his or her job, even when the medication is being used as prescribed. This can lead to impairment on the job, and can be potentially harmful.

While it is not appropriate for the employer to ask for specific medical findings and diagnoses from the employee or their health professional, employees may wish to consider informing their employer if a medical procedure or treatment may impact their ability to perform their job safely. If the organization has a substance use/abuse policy, it may be necessary to disclose the use of opioids.

Employers, along with the Union and the Health and Safety committee should review any workplace policies involving drug and alcohol use. The focus of the policy should be on "impairment" or "under the influence", and the ability to do the work safely. Policies should be inclusive and consider any prescribed drug or substance that is used medically (or otherwise).

The use of prescribed opioids however, does not permit an employee to be impaired at work, nor does the use of opioids allow that employee to endanger their own safety or the safety of others.



Do employers have a duty to accommodate?

Yes. Employees can ask for accommodations due to their medical condition. For workplaces, the duty to accommodate is required by federal and provincial human rights legislation, and this right includes those who may use medical marijuana as part of their treatment for a condition. Employers have this duty to accommodate, up to the point of "undue hardship".

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