



Substance Use Prevention

Prevention of substance use and misuse, including opioid use and opioid overdose, is complex. There are many root causes and risk factors for addiction (a common name for a substance use disorder).¹ Risk factors are characteristics associated with a higher likelihood of developing a substance use disorder (SUD). Protective factors are characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of developing a SUD, and reducing a risk factor’s impact.

However, employees may struggle with opioid misuse or an opioid use disorder (OUD) despite these prevention measures. While employers cannot address all of the risk and protective factors that occur on individual and community levels, employers can protect against workplace risk and enhance workplace protective factors.

For some, the COVID-19 pandemic will significantly increase some risk factors, including psychological risk factors (pre-existing mental health conditions, such as anxiety or depression and new mental health conditions) and social risk factors (living in a high stress environment, unstable housing, low socioeconomic status, unstable employment).² Additionally, these circumstances may exacerbate pre-existing risk factors, such as those listed in the table below.

| RISK FACTORS | TYPE | PROTECTIVE FACTORS |
|---|---------------|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genetic predisposition • Having a family history of substance use • Other illnesses or medical conditions • Changes in the brain due to prior drug use | Biological | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No genetic predisposition • No family history of substance use • No other illnesses or medical conditions |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression • Childhood trauma • Adolescent substance use | Psychological | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable mental health condition and emotional control • No childhood trauma • No adolescent substance use |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing up or living in high-stress environments • Low academic achievement • Unstable or low-income housing • Low socioeconomic status • Negative social influences • Unstable employment • Racial and ethnic background | Social | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing up or living in low-stress environments • High academic achievement • Stable housing • Positive social influences • Community engagement • Stable employment • Family support |

¹ <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/20190718-samhsa-risk-protective-factors.pdf>

² <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/returning-to-resilience-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-behavioral-health>

Employers should utilize these four tactics to help prevent opioid misuse and opioid use disorders in their workplace:

- Employee education
- Workplace policies
- Workplace culture
- Benefits and health care plans

Employee Education

Educating the workforce is essential. While employees should be educated on opioids and their risks (see the NSC [Opioids at Work Employer Toolkit](#) for more detail), there are specific risks and risky behavior that are more common with the physical distancing limitations enacted due to COVID-19.

- Coping mechanisms vary from person to person – safe, healthy behaviors and habits (for example, a glass of wine at night) may become more dramatic in times of extreme stress. Help your employees understand SUDs and how their behaviors, even if not typical, can be risky.
- Many people on prescription medications (including opioids) may be accessing them differently. Regulations allow doctors to prescribe some medications for a longer duration than was typical prior to the pandemic. This may be done to provide more refills or to minimize contact (i.e. starting patients on medications without an in-person appointment). This means a surplus of medications may be present in the house, which can be difficult to manage and keep organized. Other people may not have access to the medications they need or not be able to refill them in a timely manner. More details can be found in *A Checklist for Employees*, but remind employees to:
 - Track their medications and to discuss any concerns with a pharmacist or doctor
 - Communicate with their medical team if they are concerned about medication access, ask their pharmacist if they have any questions about stopping or starting medications and help them understand the potential implications if their medications are opioids

Workplace Policy

- While your Drug Free Workplace Program (DFWP) is still in effect, it is difficult to monitor employees at home, and drug testing capabilities may be curtailed. Focus time and attention on prevention mechanisms and work with your HR team to identify what policies may need to be temporarily suspended or changed.
 - Communicate any changes with your employees promptly and clearly.
 - Your DFWP will be critical when employees begin to return to work in person, or when the initial COVID-19 restrictions are eased and workplaces shift back towards their previous state. SAMHSA expects an increase in substance use as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may be an issue as people continue to work, return to work or it may develop later on.
- Managers and supervisors need special guidance on handling employee issues during the pandemic. There are several components to this:
 - Managers and supervisors are likely experiencing extreme levels of stress themselves – they need resources devoted to their mental health and wellbeing.

- Employees may have more acute needs and may exhibit more intense behaviors and emotions than typical. Managers and supervisors should be trained or retrained in listening skills, emotional intelligence and/or mental health first aid.
- Managers should be provided with training to help them recognize the signs and symptoms of stress, mental health issues and substance misuse in team members. They should encourage team members showing these signs to seek help from qualified mental health and/or addiction professionals.
- Medical leave and scheduling policies should be flexible enough for employees to attend medical appointments. This includes mental health services and appointments, as well as treatment for substance use – usage of both of these services may spike both during the COVID-19 crisis and after it has passed.

Workplace Culture

One of the strongest prevention mechanisms an employer can provide is a supportive workplace culture. This can lessen the impact of other factors (such as impacts from COVID-19) that put people more at risk for developing an OUD. If employees feel supported and encouraged to seek help when needed, an early diagnosis can help prevent emerging SUDs from progressing and becoming worse.

- Promote a culture of health and wellness. This may seem challenging in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it is very important. Recognize the effects of COVID-19, be honest and open about how this can impact employees and employers alike, provide resources and be flexible.
- Encourage supervisors to work with their employees to discuss how to best manage schedules and responsibilities during this time. Minimizing stress caused by work is important to promote physical and mental health.
- Promote ergonomic and overexertion initiatives to prevent injury and the need for medications.
 - Actively promote healthy behaviors during the day, such as taking scheduled breaks that will benefit both mental and physical health.
 - Acknowledge and address risks for those still working, who may be working overtime or overexerting themselves. Overexertion and fatigue are major drivers of workplace injury, and can lead to substance misuse in an effort to self-medicate or to keep oneself awake.
- Create a recovery-friendly workplace – learn more in *Treatment and Recovery During COVID-19*. With the expected increase in substance misuse and SUDs amongst the general population, pre-empting the impact on the workplace by reducing stigma and openly and actively supporting recovery can mitigate the impact on your workplace and encourage employees to seek help more quickly.
- Connect with the community – understand the landscape of local resources and provide all employees with a list. Some people will not be comfortable discussing substance use or misuse with their employer. This is a good way to reach those people without requiring vulnerability or disclosure.

Benefits and Health Care Plans

Benefits and health care plans can provide preventative services as well as treatment. All services provided should be confidential, easy to access and easy to use. Key recommendations are listed below. Learn more at [Navigating Health Care Benefits and Data](#), [Working with Benefits Providers During COVID-19: Mental Health Issues Checklist](#) and the [Employer Role in Mental Health During COVID-19](#).

- Ensure health care plans cover mental and behavioral health services
- Provide or increase access to employee assistance programs (EAPs). EAPs are an underutilized tool in providing help to employees and their loved ones who are working through an opioid use disorder. Easy access to support and medical care can prevent early stages of a substance use disorder or a mental health illness from becoming more serious.
- In event of a furlough, or a reduction in work hours offered, ensure employees understand how that impacts their benefits. Make sure this information is offered verbally and in writing. Ensure someone is available to answer questions later, as employees may not be able to ask all the questions they need after initially receiving information about furloughs or work hour reductions.