

Opioid Use in the Construction Industry

Opioids are a class of drugs that include pain relievers available legally by prescription, such as oxycodone (OxyContin®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), codeine, and morphine, and illegal drugs such as heroin and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. When taken for a short time as prescribed by doctors, opioids are generally considered safe. However, regular use can lead to psychological and physical dependence, addiction, and a desire for stronger, cheaper, and illicit forms of opioids. These highly-addictive drugs can be extremely deadly. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018 data shows that every day, 128 people in the United States die after overdosing on opioids.



Opioid abuse has found its way into every industry, including the construction industry. The construction field has one of the highest injury rates when compared to other industries and opioids are commonly prescribed to construction workers to treat the pain caused by these occupational injuries. Given the demographics of the construction workforce and based on the physical demands of the work, construction workers are probably at a greater risk of being prescribed opioids and getting addicted to them. An estimated 15 percent of construction workers have a substance abuse disorder, compared to the national average of 8.6 percent, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health by the National Safety Council. The industry also has elevated rates of opioid overdose death compared to other groups.

It is important for workers to understand the risks of opioid use and the alternatives to their use. The Center for Construction Research and Training (CPWR) has developed many resources in English and Spanish about opioid deaths, prevention, and pain management alternatives. These include hazard alerts, a toolbox talk and an infographic to display.

Find them here: [Resources to Prevent Opioid Deaths in Construction.](#)

According to the American Society of Safety Professionals (ASSP), open communication between management and employees is vital to helping those workers who are struggling with opioid abuse or addiction. Like mental health issues and suicide, a stigma has surrounded opioid use, leaving many employers and workers reluctant to discuss it. Workers need to be in an environment where they can feel comfortable speaking with their superiors about substance abuse issues, opioid or otherwise. Furthermore, employees must also feel comfortable going to management if they see warning signs of opioid abuse in a coworker. Methods such as employee assistance programs (EAPs) and member assistance programs (MAPs) provide workers a safe and confidential avenue to discuss personal issues they are experiencing, including substance abuse. By focusing on assistance and rehabilitation rather than punishment, management can create a culture in which workers can speak openly about the issues they are facing, feel supported by their employer, and turn the tide of opioid addiction.

Sources: www.assp.org, www.cdc.gov.



Fully Effective Employees is an Employee Assistance Company which assists employees with personal and work-related problems that may affect their mental and physical health, as well as their job performance. Based in Bellevue, WA, FEE offers employer consultations, training, supervisor support, and many other services to help both employees and employers with the problems they face. For more information, contact Audrey Rosenfeld at 425-557-0907 and visit www.fee-eap.com.