

# American Drug Testing

*Drug-Free Workplace Programs*

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## DRUG-FREE WORKPLACE ADVISOR

AN ONGOING SERIES TO PROTECT YOUR COMPANY BY HELPING TO KEEP DRUGS OUT OF YOUR WORKPLACE.

### Prescription Drug Abuse in the Workplace, Part I

Illicit drugs and misuse of alcohol are not the only substances that can affect health and safety in workplaces. Prescription drugs, when used without a prescription and without the supervision of a doctor, can also have adverse effects. Workers can become sleepy or anxious or depressed or confused, from the improper use of prescription drugs. As important, when these drugs are used improperly, they can pose risks to employees, their coworkers, and the overall workplace itself. The risks associated with non-medical use of prescription drugs in workplaces can escalate when workers' jobs require caution and safety to prevent injury, such as those of transportation workers, assembly line workers, construction workers, nuclear-power plant workers, and the like.

#### What Is Prescription Drug Abuse?

Prescription drug abuse has been identified as a growing problem in American workplaces. In the *National Survey*

*on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)*, SAMHSA defines prescription drug abuse as the use of prescription pain reliev-

*"...Workers can become sleepy or anxious or depressed or confused..."*

ers, tranquilizers, stimulants, or sedatives without a prescription of the respondent's own or simply for the experience or feeling the drug causes. This definition covers a wide range of

behaviors, from misusing prescription medications to get high, stay awake, or get to sleep to using someone else's medication to address a legitimate medical need. What may seem like a harmless sharing of medications can lead to addiction, misdiagnosis of illnesses, life-threatening circumstances, and death.

#### Are Prescription Drugs Safe?

Prescription drugs are safe when they are taken as directed under a doctor's orders. Fear of addiction and dependence should not stop an individual from taking medications that can help treat his or


her problems, nor prevent a physician from prescribing appropriate medications. Proper usage of prescription drugs can help workers protect their health and thus perform more productively in the workplace. However, when taken for nonmedical or recreational purposes, prescription drugs are no safer than illicit or street drugs. The misconception of prescription drugs as legal and "safe," even when abused, is particularly strong among young adults. Most prescription drug abusers obtain their

drugs free from a friend or relative. In 2006, 55.7 percent of individuals 12 and older who had used pain relievers nonmedically in the previous 12 months said they got their drugs this way. Other ways of acquiring prescription drugs include "doctor shopping" to get multiple prescriptions, taking them from a friend or relative, or buying them from a friend, relative, or dealer. It appears that the Internet is not a significant source of prescription drugs, such as opioid analgesics, for most users.

#### Prescription Drug Abuse Is a Growing Problem

Multiple sources of data make it clear that this problem is a growing one, especially for teens and young adults, which

means that employers need to be aware of the problem. Data from the Treatment Episode Data Set show that admissions for treatment of prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drug abuse rose from 3 percent of all admissions in 1999 to 4 percent in 2002. The escalation seems to come from increased rates of abuse of narcotic painkillers, which more than doubled between 1992 and 2002. As of 2003, 3 percent of admissions were for abuse of nonheroin opiates. According to the Drug Abuse Warning Network, from 1994 to 2001, emergency room visits for narcotic prescription pain relievers increased for oxycodone 352 percent, methadone 230 percent, morphine 210 percent, and hydrocodone 131 percent. Of the 1.3 million visits to emergency departments in 2004, a half million involved non-medical use of pharmaceuticals. In Part II: Young Workers at Risk. *Source: Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration* For additional information, see the "client area" at [www.AmericanDrugTesting.net](http://www.AmericanDrugTesting.net) or call 843-747-4111.

**The Drug-Free Workplace Advisor** is published by American Drug Testing, a leading drug-free workplace administrator and testing company. Call (843) 747-4111.

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