



Pharmaceuticals

Pharmaceuticals are prescribed or over-the-counter (OTC) medications.

Pharmaceutical drugs can be used to treat short- or long-term physical or mental pain or illness, and/or a range of lifestyle problems (e.g., insomnia).

Some pharmaceutical drugs can compromise workplace safety because of:

- negative side effects associated with using the drugs as intended
- misusing the drugs to induce or enhance their biological or mental affect.

Pharmaceutical misuse

Pharmaceutical misuse occurs if you take a drug for non-medical purposes:

1. to induce a pleasurable, euphoric, hallucinatory and/or out-of-body experience rather than to treat an illness
2. with other drugs to enhance a drug experience.

Misuse can also be accidental.

For example, you might inadvertently:

- increase your dose of medicine if you feel rushed or your memory is impaired
- take several different medications without knowing the harmful interactions that can result.

Discussion Date

Supervisor/Manager

Workers' Names



Pharmaceutical misuse is extremely serious. It causes more unintentional deaths than illicit drugs.

More than 70% of drug-related deaths are due to prescription medicine.¹

Ask for help if you are struggling with pharmaceutical use.

Ask others if they need help.



Workplace impact of pharmaceuticals

Like alcohol and illicit drugs, pharmaceutical medicines can:

- reduce worker productivity
- impair workers' physical and mental performance and wellbeing
- increase workplace health and safety risks.

These risks can increase if workers:

- are in safety sensitive situations (e.g., operate machinery, drive)
- have not used these drugs before
- take more than one type of medication or drug
- do not follow directions for use
- drink alcohol with their medication.

Short- and long-term effects of pharmaceutical drugs

There are many short-term effects of commonly used pharmaceutical drugs. Some are listed in the table below.

In addition to short-term effects, long-term use may result in a range of mental, physical or social problems, such as:

- physical problems (e.g., breathing difficulty, low blood pressure, high blood pressure)
- mental illness (see [Fact Sheet: Mental Health & Alcohol and Drug Use](#))
- tolerance (e.g., needing to take more of the drug to get the same effect)
- dependence (e.g., difficulty functioning when not using the drug)
- withdrawal (e.g., when you stop using the drug and you experience a range of possible effects including fatigue, hunger, energy loss, irritability, anxiety, depression, cravings, stomach problems, aches or pains).



Driving 'under the influence' is an offence.

It applies to all drugs, including pharmaceuticals.

Workers who drive, operate machinery, or work in safety sensitive situations put themselves and others at risk when affected by pharmaceutical drugs.

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Overdose

Overdose can occur if too much of a drug (or combination of drugs) has been taken. Different drugs have different signs of toxicity.

If a worker has overdosed, they may:

1. fall into a deep sleep and be difficult to rouse
2. be conscious but unresponsive (stupor)
3. have pale or bluish skin and feel cold
4. have difficulty and/or slowed breathing and make gurgling or gasping sounds
5. vomit and/or have seizures.



If you think a co-worker has overdosed:

1. Phone 000
2. Ask for an ambulance
3. Administer first aid until ambulance arrives
4. Contact your manager or supervisor.

Naloxone may be administered for opioid overdose. [SA Health Preventing and responding to adverse effects of opioids: naloxone.](#)

Discussion topics

1. What can you do to monitor pharmaceutical use?
2. Have you taken more medicine than recommended on the pack or prescribed by your Dr?
3. If you have been prescribed a medicine that makes you feel drowsy, what should you do to minimise risks to yourself and the workplace?
4. What could you do if you were concerned about a co-worker's pharmaceutical misuse?
5. Is it ever OK to share prescribed medicine with a co-worker?

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Medical use and short-term effects of common pharmaceutical drugs

Analgesics (e.g., Panadol, aspirin, opioids)

Purpose	Pain relief	
Effect on worker	Can cause dizziness and drowsiness, and increase the risk of stomach bleeding, heart attack or stroke if used in high dosages or for lengthy periods.	
More information	Alcohol and Drug Foundation Website https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/aspirin/ /buprenorphine/ /codeine/ /fentanyl/ /methadone/ /opioids/ /opium/ /oxycodone/ /paracetamol/	National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/resource/heroin-0 /pharmaceutical-opioids /codeine /oxycodone

Antipsychotics (e.g., Aripiprazole, Clozapine, Olanzapine, Risperidone)

Purpose	Treatment of some mental health disorders (e.g., depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder).	
Effect on worker	Can cause sedation, dizziness, poor decision making, blurred vision, high or low blood pressure, high blood sugar, cognitive impairment, and increase risk of falls.	
More information	https://www.sane.org/information-stories/facts-and-guides/antipsychotic-medication https://www.yourhealthinmind.org/treatments-medication/antipsychotic-medication https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/antipsychotic-medications https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/antipsychotic-medications	

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Benzodiazepines | Tranquilisers (e.g., Serepax, Mogadon, and Valium)

Purpose Relief of stress, anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, seizures, muscle spasms, agitation, alcohol withdrawal, and to ease the come down effects of stimulant use.

Effect on worker Can cause confusion, memory loss, blurred vision, drowsiness and fatigue, irritability, paranoia, aggression, headaches and dizziness, and impaired thinking and coordination.

More information <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/benzodiazepines/>
<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-tranquilizers-22501>
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/tranquillisers>

Mood stabilisers (e.g., lithium, valproate)

Purpose Treatment of some mental health disorders (e.g., bipolar disorder, depression).

Effect on worker Can cause blurred vision, confusion, difficulty concentrating, dizziness, drowsiness, increased sun sensitivity, and poor coordination.

More information <https://www.nps.org.au/australian-prescriber/articles/mood-stabilisers>
<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/bipolar-disorder-medication>
<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/lithium-and-other-mood-stabilisers/#.XN0HKpgzaUk>
<https://www.webmd.com/bipolar-disorder/guide/medications-bipolar-disorder#1>

Statins (e.g., Lipitor, Crestor)

Purpose Treatment of medical conditions such as high cholesterol and heart disease.

Effect on worker Common side effects include sleep difficulties, dizziness, drowsiness, and muscle weakness.
Can also cause memory loss and mental confusion.

More information <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/statins>
<https://ama.com.au/ausmed/some-things-you-should-know-about-statins-and-heart-disease>
<https://www.webmd.com/cholesterol-management/side-effects-of-statin-drugs#1>

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Stimulants (e.g., Adderall, Ritalin, Dexedrine)

Purpose	Treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), some sleep disorders, and some acquired brain injuries.
Effect on worker	When misused, prescribed stimulants can impair concentration, ability to gauge speed and distance, and judgement and coordination, and increase irritability and agitation.
More information	https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/stimulants/ https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/amphetamines/

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Handouts, Apps & Online Information (available from the WorkLife website)

Getting Help Websites

- DASSA Know Your Options: <https://knowyouroptions.sa.gov.au/>

Apps

- MedicineWise app: Manage medicines on your smartphone: <https://www.nps.org.au/consumers/medicinewise-app>.

Videos

Alcohol and Drug Foundation:

- Are you taking a risk? Available from <https://youtu.be/g1uG9Gyf-3U>.
- Soula's story: losing yourself in pain medication. Available from https://youtu.be/ug_SxxPS2qQ.

Resources and handouts are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/external-site-resources>.

References are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/references>.