

Pharmaceuticals

Pharmaceutical drugs include prescribed or over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Workers may use pharmaceutical drugs to treat short- or long-term physical or mental pain or illness, and/or lifestyle problems (e.g., insomnia).

Some pharmaceutical drugs can compromise workplace safety as a result of:

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

Workers suffering from a work-related physical or mental injury may use pharmaceuticals as part of their treatment and recovery process.

Employers have a responsibility to help workers manage and understand the risks of prescription medications.³

Pharmaceutical misuse

Pharmaceutical drugs are misused when taken for non-medical purposes.

- A worker might use a drug:
- to induce pleasurable, euphoric, hallucinatory and/or out-of-body experiences rather than to treat an illness
 - together with other drugs to enhance the experience.

Misuse may be accidental.

- A worker may inadvertently:
- increase their dose of medicine if they feel rushed or their memory is impaired
 - take several different medications without knowing the harmful interactions that can result.

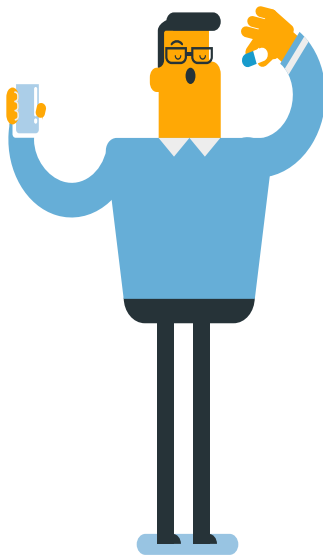
 **Pharmaceutical misuse causes more unintentional deaths than illicit drugs.**



Quick facts



People living with mental illness (28%) or chronic pain (11%) are more likely to misuse pharmaceuticals than other people.¹



Approximately 4% of Australian workers misused pharmaceuticals during 2019.²

Male workers are likely to misuse pharmaceuticals than female workers.²

Younger workers are slightly more likely than older workers to misuse pharmaceuticals.²

Prescribed painkillers/opioids are the pharmaceutical drugs most commonly misused.²

Almost 3% of workers misused painkillers/opioids.²

7% of these workers usually consumed painkillers/opioids in the workplace.²



Most people who used prescription medicine for non-medical purposes got the medicine from their family or friends.



Workplace risk

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
- are taking more than one type of medication
- do not follow directions for use
- drink alcohol with their medication.



Driving 'under the influence' is an offence.
It applies to all drugs, including pharmaceuticals.

Responding to pharmaceutical risk in workplaces

Developing and implementing a formal alcohol and drug policy is crucial in managing any drug-related risk to workplace health and safety. If you already have a policy, review it to ensure it is up-to-date and comprehensive.

To understand how many workers are using/misusing pharmaceuticals:

1. conduct a needs/risk assessment
2. consider your workplace's rate of injury and illness
3. speak with workers about pharmaceutical use.

Your workplace alcohol and drug policy should include provisions about pharmaceutical use, reporting, and management, and:

- contain reporting protocols for prescription medicine
- define under the influence
- prohibit workers from sharing prescribed medication.



It is an offence to share prescribed medications.

Don't share what you have spare.



Workers should be encouraged to:

1. monitor their pharmaceutical use with the [MedicineWise app](#)
2. discuss their medication and alternative options (e.g., lifestyle changes) with their GP. The alternative treatment fact sheet developed by the [Alcohol and Drug Foundation](#) can help guide these conversations
3. learn about the effects of mixing pharmaceuticals with other legal and/or illicit drugs, including alcohol
4. understand the importance of taking pharmaceuticals only as directed
5. inform the appropriate worksite person about any pharmaceutical use which may impact workplace safety.

Overdose

Overdose can occur if too much of the 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 worker has overdosed:

1. Phone 000
2. Ask for an ambulance
3. Administer first aid until ambulance arrives.

See [How-to-Guide: Critical Alcohol and Drug Situations](#) for more information about emergency responses.



Workplace impact of pharmaceuticals

Drug type	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
Drug type	Antipsychotics (e.g., Aripiprazole, Clozapine, Olanzapine, Risperidone)	
Purpose	Treat some mental health disorders (e.g., depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder).	
Effect on worker	Can cause sedation, dizziness, poor decision making, blurred vision, diabetes, high or low blood pressure, high blood sugar, high cholesterol, cognitive impairment, low blood pressure and increase risk of falls.	
More information	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	
Drug type	Benzodiazepines Tranquilisers (e.g., Serepax, Mogadon, and Valium)	
Purpose	Relieve 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.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/tranquillisers>

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

Purpose Treat 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.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>

Drug type Statins (e.g., Lipitor, Crestor)

Purpose Treat 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>

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

Purpose Treat 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.

More information <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/stimulants/>
<https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/amphetamines/>

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

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