

FACTSHEET 6

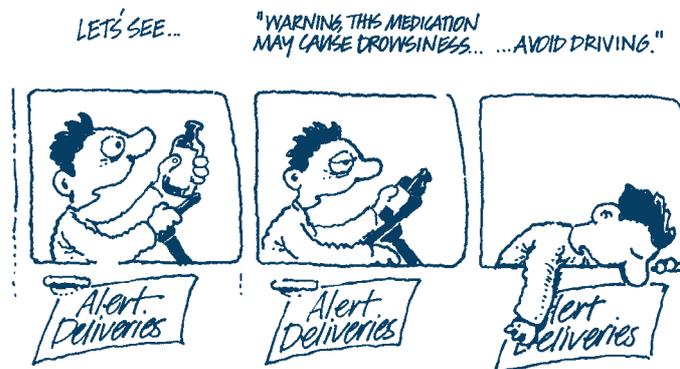
PRESCRIPTION DRUGS, OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICATIONS AND WORK

A typical situation

You know that an employee has been prescribed tranquillisers to help them cope with stress and you are concerned because their job involves driving a vehicle.

Work performance and safety concerns

Employers have a legitimate concern with the work performance of all their employees, particularly where it involves health and safety. If an employee is taking medication this is not in itself the concern of the employer. However, it becomes relevant when the medication affects the person's job performance or safe work practice.



Prescription and over-the-counter drugs: The facts

Two common examples of drug types which can affect work performance are outlined below. Note that these are not the only types of medications that may affect work performance. There are many different forms of medication and a doctor or pharmacist should always be consulted about their effects.



Tranquillisers

Tranquillisers are drugs that relieve mild anxiety and tension. Normally a person feels relaxed, and perhaps loses some inhibition after taking tranquillisers. Some people may become drowsy and others can begin to feel socially disconnected. Examples of commonly prescribed tranquillisers are:

- Serepax
- Mogadon
- Valium.

Tranquillisers can be addictive even in moderate doses. Users may experience withdrawal symptoms such as:

- restlessness
- anxiety
- insomnia
- weakness
- nausea
- vomiting and convulsions.

These symptoms can occur particularly if use of drugs is suddenly stopped.

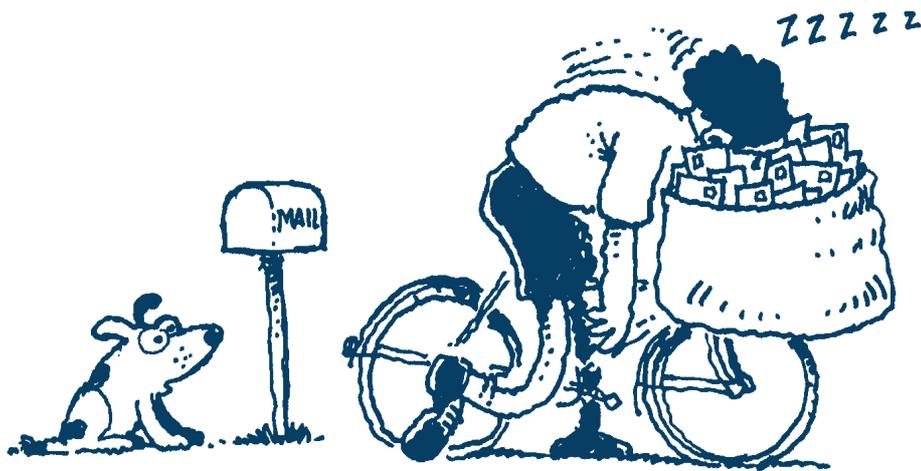
Antihistamines

Antihistamines are used to treat allergies such as hay fever and may be prescribed or bought over-the-counter. Medicines for colds, coughs, congestion, sore throats, blocked noses and sinus problems may contain antihistamines. They can cause drowsiness and should be used with caution by those operating machinery or driving, or engaged in skilled work involving risks.

How is work performance affected?

Tranquillisers

Low doses can make a person feel good and less inhibited. As the dose increases so does the level of sedation and the loss of coordination. A person's reactions to things happening around them will become slower and eventually they may fall asleep. Some tranquillisers can build up in the body if taken over a long time. In these cases, it is recommended that driving motor vehicles and operating machinery are avoided.



Antihistamines

Some antihistamines make the user drowsy. Cough and cold remedies which contain antihistamines can have this effect and this is usually indicated by a warning on the packaging of the medication. To reduce the risk of accident or injury, it is recommended that medication containing antihistamines be avoided if driving a vehicle or operating machinery. A doctor or pharmacist can suggest alternative medication that does not cause drowsiness.

Apart from the health risks, it is an offence to drive while under the influence of drugs which impair performance. Not knowing about the side effects of a drug is not a defence in the case of an accident.

Combining alcohol with prescribed and over-the-counter drugs

The effects of many drugs are increased if taken with alcohol and the drug's effects can become unpredictable.

Alcohol should be avoided when taking these medicines and caution should be applied when using any medications.

Medical advice should be sought about driving when taking medication, and its effect when combined with alcohol.





Preventing problems with prescription and over-the-counter medications

To minimise any potential problems or complications:

- consult a doctor or pharmacist about the potential impact of drugs on work performance
- take prescribed and over-the-counter drugs in the correct doses and as directed
- be aware of the effects when combined with other drugs such as alcohol or illicit
- avoid prescribed or over-the-counter drugs which may cause drowsiness when driving or operating machinery. Otherwise, do not attempt these activities when taking the drugs
- ensure all employees are aware of these points.

Further information or help concerning prescribed and over-the-counter drugs can be obtained from the websites and organisations listed in Booklet 2 of the Information and Resource Package.