

FACTSHEET 3

AMPHETAMINES AND WORK

A typical situation

An employee mentions that a workmate is behaving strangely. He is unpredictable with bursts of nervous energy followed by rapid mood swings and depression.

A number of things including amphetamine (speed) use could cause this type of behaviour. An employer cannot accuse an employee of using amphetamines without supporting evidence. However, for legal and occupational health and safety reasons, the use of amphetamines at work is not acceptable.

Amphetamines: The facts

Amphetamines are drugs that artificially stimulate the central nervous system. They speed up messages from the brain to the body and can:

- reduce tiredness
- increase endurance
- help the user stay awake.

Amphetamines are often made using crude methods and equipment in uncontrolled backyard labs. This means that the purity and strength of the drug is unknown, which can lead to unpredictable effects. It is easy to overdose if the strength is unknown.

Amphetamines can be found as tablets, capsules, a red liquid, in crystal form or white, yellow or brown powder. It can be swallowed, inhaled through the nose ('snorted'), or dissolved in a small amount of water and injected. Amphetamines, and related drugs known as amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), can vary in strength and potency. Many of the more severe effects occur with the drug 'methamphetamine'.

How do amphetamines affect work performance?

Many amphetamine users are not dependent and only use occasionally. More regular users frequently adopt a 'binge' pattern. A typical pattern of speed use commences with the intoxication phase, or 'run' (a single session of a few days to weeks), followed by a short period of abstinence, or the 'crash' (feeling flat, tired, withdrawn, poor appetite, few cravings). If amphetamines are used heavily over the weekend a worker may feel very flat on Tuesday or Wednesday (known as 'weepy Wednesdays') as a result of the come down effect. For dependent users, reinstatement of use (another 'run') may occur, however, if use is ceased, withdrawal may be experienced.



While amphetamines may result in, or exacerbate health, social or mental health problems, many people will not link these problems with their drug use. Triggers to assist discussion about lifestyle factors incorporating amphetamine use may include features of intoxication, withdrawal or crash, such as:

- overwhelming tiredness at the beginning of the working week
- otherwise unexplained irritability, agitation or moodswings
- difficulty concentrating, poor work or study performance
- mental health problems, such as paranoia, delusions, feeling generally flat or depressed
- apparent unconcern about otherwise serious matters
- health problems, such as palpitations, infected injection sites or lesions.

Operating machinery or driving a vehicle

Amphetamine use may cause a person to drive aggressively and to take risks. Amphetamines affect the ability to judge speed and distance. When the effects have worn off, a driver may experience extreme drowsiness and be unable to stay awake. It is illegal to drive under the influence of amphetamines or any other drugs. Amphetamine use can also lead to poor judgment and loss of coordination and for this reason it is not safe to operate machinery when affected by amphetamines.

Relations with customers and other employees

Amphetamines can make a person feel more energetic and full of confidence. Users may become:

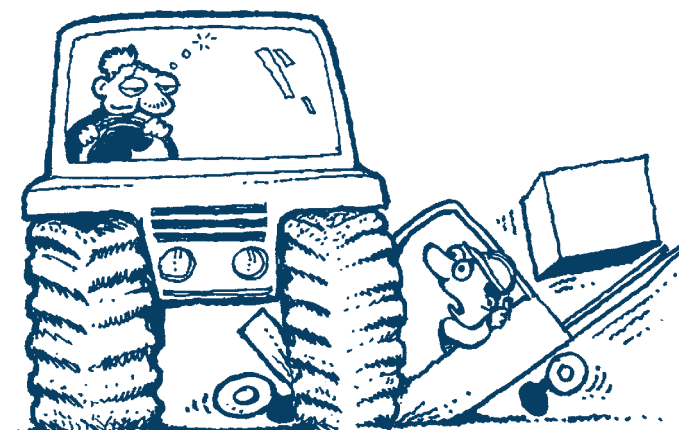
- talkative
- restless
- excited.

Some amphetamine users can also become:

- anxious
- hostile
- aggressive.

General effects

Amphetamines increase the heart rate, breathing and blood pressure. The pupils of the eyes may become larger, and a dry mouth and increased sweating may occur.



The effects of amphetamines may lead to enhanced work performance in the short-term, but this will not last. As the effects wear off the user may show signs of tension, radical mood swings, uncontrolled violence, depression and total exhaustion.

Longer-term effects

People who use large amounts of amphetamines over an extended period of time may suffer deterioration to their health. Amphetamine use is associated with:

- paranoia
- tension
- hyperactivity
- chronic sleeping problems
- reduced appetite
- may lead to weight loss and malnutrition.

Regular users are less resistant to infections because they often don't eat or sleep properly and may be generally run down.

Amphetamine users often take other drugs to cope with the effects. If a person cannot eat or sleep because they have been taking amphetamines, they may turn to sleeping tablets or alcohol.

The typical pattern of 'using and stopping' varies across individuals and with previous withdrawal experiences. Most withdrawal signs and symptoms dissipate over the course of two weeks to a month, however, withdrawal may be protracted, lasting a few months more.

During the crash phase (days 1–4 post cessation of use) common complaints may include:

- fatigue and exhaustion
- hunger
- emotional lability (irritable, agitated, depressed)
- overwhelming desire to sleep, or sleeping difficulties
- cravings.

During the crash phase, advise carers to ensure that adequate food and fluids are provided and encouraged.

During the next week, typical complaints include:

- strong cravings or urges to use
- disrupted sleeping patterns and sleeping difficulties
- mood swings
- headaches, and generalised aches and pains
- increased appetite
- irritability, possibly paranoia or misinterpretation of surroundings.

During the following weeks, most signs and symptoms tend to subside, with mood swings, sleeping problems and cravings causing the most difficulty. After 1–3 months, sleeping patterns, health and interest in other activities should return to normal.

Amphetamines and the law

People found in possession of amphetamines can be referred for counselling and possible treatment. However, possessing, using, producing or selling amphetamines can also lead to fines and prison sentences or both.

Employers' legal obligations

There is no penalty for an employer if amphetamines are used at the worksite, except under occupational health and safety requirements, nor are they obliged to inform the police. Due to the illegal nature of these drugs and for health and safety reasons, amphetamine use is not acceptable in the workplace.

No 'sure fire' way to detect amphetamine or other drug use

Symptoms associated with various drugs are the same as those that occur with many common place events. Constant grinding of teeth, anxiousness or restlessness may indicate amphetamine use. However, these signs may also indicate that the person is simply nervous or agitated for other reasons.

Some employers may consider drug testing however, it is expensive and fraught with difficulties. Drug testing is discussed further in Section 7 of the Information and Resource Package.

Summary

As with other illegal drug use, amphetamine use is not acceptable in the workplace because:

- it is an illegal substance
- the legal penalties for using amphetamines in the workplace include a fine and a criminal conviction
- work performance may be affected
- the safety of the user and others may be affected
- it puts other workers and the owner or manager in a difficult position
- under workers compensation rules, a disability is not compensable if it is wholly or predominantly due to the influence of amphetamines.

Further information or help concerning amphetamines can be obtained from the websites and organisations listed in Booklet 2 of the Information and Resource Package.