

## FACTSHEET 5

# OTHER ILLICIT DRUGS AND WORK

### ***A typical situation***

*A cleaner finds a couple of used syringes in a rubbish bin and you suspect that a co-worker or employee may be injecting drugs.*

*This is a difficult situation because an employer cannot simply accuse someone of using illicit drugs without supporting evidence. It is possible that an employee may be diabetic and is injecting insulin. Whatever the reason, syringes must be disposed of appropriately and with care. Discarding syringes in public bins is a dangerous practice.*

*Any form of illicit drug use is not acceptable in the workplace.*

## **Illicit drugs: The facts**

There is range of illicit drugs that can effect an individual and their work performance.

Illicit drugs can be classified into three main groups, depending on the way that they affect the brain. These groups are stimulants, depressants and hallucinogens. Examples of the types of drugs that fit into these three main groups are presented below. Cannabis, the most widely used illicit drug, is covered in Factsheet 2.

### **Stimulants**

Examples include:

- Amphetamines (speed)
- Cocaine
- Ecstasy.

Stimulant effects include increased activity, talkativeness, feelings of well-being, self-confidence and power. They also cause feelings of reduced fatigue, loss of appetite and may also lead to irritability, argumentativeness, extreme nervousness and sleeplessness. In larger doses, stimulants may lead to violence, delusions and hallucinations.

## Depressants

Examples include:

- Heroin
- Morphine
- Methadone
- Alcohol
- Benzodiazepines.

The effects of depressants in small doses are usually feelings of well-being, calmness and relaxation, drowsiness or stupor. They relieve pain and anxiety and decrease awareness of the outside world. In larger doses, depressants can lead to a deep sleep. They can slow respiration and stop breathing. Some depressants in large doses may cause memory problems, depression and poor coordination.

## Hallucinogens

Examples include:

- LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide)
- Magic mushrooms
- PCP (angel dust).

The effects of hallucinogens include changes in mood, perception and sometimes hallucinations. Physical effects may be dilated pupils, rapid heart beat, muscular weakness, trembling, nausea, chills and hyperventilation. Anxious feelings and panic due to loss of control may also be experienced.

Apart from cannabis, the level of illicit drug use in Australia remains relatively low.

Most deaths involving illegal drugs are the result of accidental overdose often involving respiratory failure, or cardiac arrest. Drug users who inject are at risk of getting hepatitis B, hepatitis C and the HIV virus (from sharing needles).

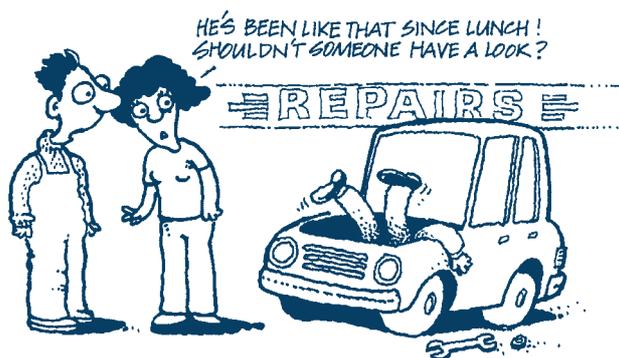
## How is work performance affected?

### Operating machinery or driving a vehicle

Driving a vehicle under the influence of any drug is illegal.

**Stimulants** are likely to cause a person to drive more aggressively and take more risks. They affect the ability to judge speed and distance.

**Depressants** affect concentration, balance and coordination. They slow reaction times and interfere with perceptions of sound, time and space.



**Hallucinogens** impair movement, coordination, may affect hearing, vision and sense of time and space.

All of the above effects can have a dangerous impact on the ability to operate machinery, drive a vehicle, or perform skilled tasks.

### Accidents

As normal skills become impaired the risk of accidents increases. Any accidents in the workplace involving drugs of the types outlined above may not be covered by workers compensation.

### Relations with customers and other employees

**Stimulants** may increase an employee's self-confidence, but can also cause them to become hyperactive, aggressive and talk rapidly.

**Depressants** slow down the activity of the brain and can make the user less aware of their surroundings and so less able to deal with them. The user may appear withdrawn or distracted and may have difficulty holding a sensible conversation.

**Hallucinogens** may cause the user to appear either stunned, 'vacant', or seem happy with plenty of nervous energy. In either case, their ability to behave 'normally' when dealing with other people may be reduced.

### General skills

**Stimulants** can impair performance of everyday tasks by the user becoming over anxious. Some users may become irrational and endanger themselves and others by overestimating their abilities.

**Depressants** essentially will make an employee work more slowly. They may be hesitant, clumsy and uncoordinated.

**Hallucinogens** affect general skills because they distort thinking processes and impair coordination. Hearing and vision may be intensified or merged and sense of time may be affected.

### **No 'sure fire' way to detect drug use**

Symptoms associated with various drugs can be the same as those which often occur in everyday life. For example, constant red eyes may indicate chronic drug use, but they could also indicate hay fever, an allergy or tiredness.

Drug testing may be considered an option. However, testing employees for illicit drug use is expensive and often inaccurate. There is no evidence to show that drug tests can identify impaired work performance. Drug testing in the workplace is usually restricted to limited circumstances where employees are in high safety risk occupations (e.g., airline pilots). Drug testing is discussed in more detail in Section 8 of the Information and Resource Package.

### **Illicit drugs and the law**

Possession, use, manufacture and sale of any of illicit drugs can lead to heavy penalties including long prison sentences.

#### **Travelling overseas**

Convictions for drug use or possession can have serious consequences for travelling and working overseas. For example, getting a visa for either Japan or the United States may be prevented. It could interfere with actual and potential export dealings.

#### **Criminal behaviours**

The costly and illegal nature of many drugs can lead to concerns about the honesty and trustworthiness of employees or co-workers. This may be of particular relevance where people are dealing with money or valuable resources in the workplace.

#### **Employers' legal obligations**

There is no penalty for an employer if illicit drugs are used at the worksite except when it is an occupational health and safety issue, nor are they obliged to inform the police.

Illicit drug use in the workplace is not acceptable because of its illegal nature and the threat it poses to health and safety.

#### **Sale of drugs**

A person is considered to take part in the manufacture, production, sale, supply or administration of an illicit drug if they provide the premises in which any such step is taken. If an employer is aware that anyone is selling or supplying illicit drugs on the premises, it must be stopped immediately.

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