



Yes, it's probably in your workplace, too!

With all the media attention focused on prescription (Rx) drug and heroin abuse and deaths, sometimes other news-worthy markers of our country's substance abuse status slip under the radar. For example,

- The truck driver high on methamphetamine who, after barely missing a busload of high school boys returning from a track meet, hit the car following the bus driven by the boys' assistance coach, resulting in the deaths of both drivers.
- How drinking has been linked to a [decline in brain health](#).
- That cocaine is one of the [top two drugs involved in overdose deaths](#).



In May, Quest Diagnostics published its [Drug Testing Index](#)™ reporting the results for over 10 million workplace drug tests performed in America in 2016. The results are disturbing. The overall positivity rate increased for the *fourth year in a row* to the highest level we've seen in 12 years.

We're going the wrong way!

The next critical question this begs is, "What drugs are employees testing positive for?" Given all the press, we would assume that Rx painkillers and heroin would be on the rise. However, heroin leveled off after four years of increase and the opioid category -- including hydrocodone, hydromorphone and oxycodone -- declined for the fourth year in a row. This being evidence that efforts by state and federal authorities to more tightly control opiate prescribing are producing results.

However, cocaine and methamphetamine, substances with well-established dangers, have both dramatically increased. Cocaine jumped by 12% and methamphetamine by 8%. This is shocking!

And then there's marijuana, which continues to be the cause for the highest percentage of positives across all drug testing categories (e.g., post-accident, random, new hire). Nationwide, marijuana positives have increased dramatically over the last three years. But in Colorado and Washington, the first two states to legalized recreational use, the increases are double the national average -- convincing evidence that with a lowered perception of risk coupled with access, use will increase.

Legal within a state or not, we cannot forget that ingestion of marijuana creates safety and productivity issues for workplaces. We know that there is an impact on focus and learning, and that smoking marijuana impacts short-term memory, has links to depression and impairs coordination.

So as employers, at this point, which drug should we be most concerned about? The terrain is so complicated, it feels like we can't get ahead of this insidious problem. Yet there is one method of operation that can help protect an employer no matter which drug-of-the-day threatens your workplace: OPERATE A COMPREHENSIVE DRUG-FREE WORKPLACE (DFWP) PROGRAM. The five components of a DFWP program are strategically designed to manage the risk of *any* illicit drug use that can compromise workplace safety and productivity.

What we cannot afford to do is take shortcuts ("I just won't test for marijuana."), or bury our heads in the sand ("I know it's a problem, but not in my workplace. I *know* all my employees and I would know if there's a problem.").

For years, studies have underscored that institutional denial can be our enemy. In poll after poll employers have been asked if they think substance abuse is a problem in the workplace, and inevitably, the responses are a resounding, "Yes!" Yet when those same employers are asked whether they are experiencing losses due to substance abuse, unless they are well informed and *very* conscious, the responses are generally, "No, not here." It's hard to reconcile what we visualize when we think of a substance abuser with the faces we work with every day.

There's a new tool that may help break through that veil of denial, the [Substance Use Cost Calculator for Employers](#), provided through a collaboration between the National Safety Council, the national non-profit Shatterproof, and NORC, an independent research institution at the University of Chicago. Best suited for companies of over 100 employees, this calculator asks for your industry type and number of employees, then applies the latest research on employment costs and data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) to calculate how much substance use in your workplace costs you annually.

Whether knowingly or not, employers are being impacted by substance abuse. To protect the lives of their employees and their bottom lines, employers need to be part of the solution to America's substance abuse problem. The most efficient practice to deal with *today's* drug of choice, and whatever becomes popular *tomorrow*, is to operate a comprehensive DFWP program. It's in the best interest of us all!