

## **Signs and Symptoms of Drug and Alcohol Abuse** **A resource for managers**

### **Introduction**

A drug is a chemical substance that acts on the brain and the body, changing a person's mood, emotion or state of consciousness.

Drugs can be classified by the effects that they have:

- Stimulants (e.g. cocaine) make people full of energy.
- Depressants (e.g. heroin) make people feel relaxed.
- Hallucinogens (e.g. LSD) make people see, feel or hear things that are not real.

Under British law, most drugs are illegal. However, some are legal, for example alcohol. Prescription medications, such as strong painkillers and antidepressants, have the ability to alter mood, cause sedation and the potential for misuse.

### **The symptoms and signs of drug or alcohol misuse**

Physical signs and symptoms that you might look out for include:

- Sudden mood changes.
- Irritability or aggression.
- Abnormal fluctuations in concentration and energy.
- Confusion and disorientation.
- Depression and paranoia.
- Smell of alcohol on breath.
- Unkempt appearance.
- Hand tremor.
- For snorted drugs, chronic nosebleeds.

Work-related signs that you might look for include:

- Poor time keeping.
- Decreased productivity at work.
- Increased absenteeism.
- Poor decision-making.
- Increased likelihood of accidents in the work place.
- Deterioration in relationships with colleagues, customers or management.
- Dishonesty and theft (arising from the need to maintain an expensive habit).



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No single pattern of signs exists to identify problems but the above signs, especially when occurring in combination, or as a pattern over a period of time, **may** indicate an alcohol or drug related problem.

***It is important to remember that all of the above symptoms can be caused by other factors, including medical conditions. They should be regarded only as an indication that an employee may be misusing drugs or alcohol.***

### **The company policy on substance misuse**

As well as referring to this guidance, managers should familiarise themselves with their company's policy on substance misuse. The substance misuse policy will give you guidance on how to proceed when faced with a case of suspected substance misuse in an employee. It is important that you adhere to the principles and processes set out in this policy.

Consideration should also be given to obtaining occupational health advice at an early stage. Telephone advice can be very helpful in more urgent cases, but formal management referral will often be necessary. If referring an employee with a suspected substance misuse problem to occupational health, ideally you will have discussed your concerns directly with the employee first, so that they understand the reason for the referral.

### **Further help for individuals with a substance misuse problem**

Individuals who admit to a problem with substance misuse should be strongly encouraged to seek help through their GP. In addition there are a number of other organisations that can provide advice, support and access to services. These include:

- FRANK ([www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)); tel: 0800 776600.
- Addaction ([www.addaction.org.uk](http://www.addaction.org.uk)).
- NHS direct ([www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)), which has information on its website, as well as offering telephone advice; tel: 0845 4647.



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