

## Going cold turkey on drug abuse

Written by Sheq Management

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Drug abuse among employees puts them and their peers at risk of workplace accidents. SHEQ Management investigates how companies can identify, prevent and reduce substance abuse in the workplace

The World Drug Report 2016 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that in 2014, around 207 400 people between the age of 15 and 64 died worldwide, due to drug abuse. It also estimates that between 11 and 25 percent of the South African population use drugs.

According to Africa Check, there is no regular representative survey on substance abuse in South Africa. Most available statistics are referencing figures from the South African Community Epidemiology of Drug Use (SACENDU), which collects its data from government-funded and private rehabilitation centres.

SACENDU currently collects information from 70 percent of the treatment centres in the country. A report from 2015 gathered information from 10 936 patients and found that the biggest proportion, around 32 percent, were at the centre for cannabis abuse.

Many drugs, including cannabis, are used for recreational purposes and to enhance cognitive functions, such as staying awake. However, these drugs also often inhibit cognitive functions and impair judgement. This puts the employee, peers and the company at risk.

Employees in high-stress industries are especially vulnerable to substance abuse as they turn to narcotics to cope. Companies need to know the warning signs of drug abuse and the actions they can take to prevent it.

### Warning signs

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Mike Crossland, product manager at safety equipment supplier PSA Africa, shares a few of the tell-tale signs indicating that employees might be under the influence of narcotics. Some of the most obvious signs are poor performance, absenteeism and a lack of motivation.

“Companies should also look for signs of agitation, aggressiveness, bloodshot eyes, shakes, tremors, lack of concern for appearance or personal hygiene, financial problems or an unusual need for money as a potential indication of drug abuse,” he explains.

### Reduce or prevent drug use

Whether or not an employer suspects drug abuse, it is best to take a proactive approach. Employers can start by educating employees, reviewing their performance and undertaking routine drug testing.

The latter is an effective way of preventing or reducing drug abuse, as employees are forced to abstain from using narcotics in order to pass the tests. Crossland explains that there are various ways to test for narcotics, which include urine, saliva, hair and blood testing.

“In the workplace, urine and saliva testing is the most common. Testing saliva is the least invasive, but more expensive. Testing of urine is the most widely used and the most reliable when testing for tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), or marijuana. The Noble Split Specimen Cup is, for example, a premium product that PSA Africa offers and is widely used across the United States for workplace testing,” he says.

### Spontaneous testing is best

Ideally, drug tests should be carried out every six months or during the employees' yearly

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medical examination. However, when drug testing becomes too predictable, it could make it easy for employees to clear their system beforehand in order to pass the test.

“The best option is a random screening programme that has the element of surprise. However, the screening must still be fair and not target any specific employees or groups of employees. The best policy is to test all employees including the CEO,” Crossland notes.

Another preventative measure is to conduct drug screenings before employment is offered to an individual and a screening after an incident occurs. Crossland states: “All employees must be notified in writing, in either their employment contract or via a signed copy of the substance abuse policy, that screening or testing may take place at the discretion of the employer.”

### What to do when drugs are found

If a company should find that an employee is under the influence of narcotics, the employee can be dismissed. Crossland explains: “The use of drugs at the workplace, or coming to work while under the influence of drugs, is a dismissible offence, but the company will have to make sure it follows the rules, regulations and labour laws closely.”

Employers should consider the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the internal policies and regulation documents of the company. Crossland adds that many companies choose to support employees who might have a substance-abuse problem through employee assistance programmes (EAP) and counselling.

“Most companies also have EAPs, which are designed to help employees who have substance abuse issues. Addiction is a disease and employees deserve a fair chance,” he concludes.

### Does the legalisation of marijuana need more thought?

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