

06F ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

Key questions to ask

- Why should I address alcohol and other drugs in my workplace?
- What can I do to address alcohol and other drugs in my workplace?
- How do I know if our program has been a success?
- How have others done it?
- Where can I go for more information?



In this section, we look at a range of issues around alcohol and drug use in the workplace.



A healthy workplace is good for business

WHY SHOULD I ADDRESS ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS IN MY WORKPLACE?

The consumption of alcohol and other drugs both during and outside of work hours can have a damaging impact on employee health, productivity and workplace safety.

Nationally, nearly 9% of employees drink alcohol while at work, while almost 1% of employees use drugs while at work.¹ This is more common in particular industries, including hospitality, construction and financial services. Tradespeople and unskilled workers have been identified at being of greater risk of consuming alcohol and drugs while at work.¹

Research also shows that specific industry groups have a larger proportion of employees who generally drink alcohol at levels associated with harm. These include hospitality, agriculture and mining, with tradespeople and unskilled workers again identified to be at greater risk.²

A large proportion of the Australian workforce also engages in work-related drinking, for example, socialising and drinking after work.² In some organisations and industries this is a well-established routine and may not necessarily be a problem if safer levels of drinking are established as the social norm. Friday night drinks, for example, can be an excellent networking or team-building opportunity or a great chance to unwind.

While there is no safe level of alcohol consumption, the National Health and Medical Research Council has issued guidelines³ for alcohol consumption that may reduce the risk of alcohol-related harm (see *What are 'safer' levels of alcohol consumption?*).

Excessive consumption of alcohol or other drugs is linked to a wide variety of health and social problems, including accidents, injuries and violence in the short-term and liver disease, brain damage and social isolation in the long-term.⁴



Is your workplace in one of the recognised high-risk industries?



A healthy workplace is good for business

What are 'safer' levels of alcohol consumption?

The National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines³ state:

- to reduce the risk of alcohol-related harm over a lifetime, drink no more than two standard drinks on any day
- to reduce the risk of injury on a single occasion of drinking, drink no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion
- that for young people aged under 18 years, drinking alcohol is not advised. The initiation of drinking should be delayed for as long as possible for this age group.

These guidelines apply to both men and women.

The guidelines also state that for women who are pregnant, planning pregnancy or breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

Besides alcohol, there are many other drugs that may impact on safety and performance if taken while at work, or if their effects are still current while an employee is at work. These include:

- illicit drugs (such as cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine, heroin and other morphine derivatives)
- prescription drugs (such as tranquilisers or pain medication)

WHY SHOULD I ADDRESS ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS IN MY WORKPLACE?

- over-the-counter medications (such as anti-histamines or cold and flu remedies)
- or
- any combination of these.

Combining alcohol and other drugs can also lead to increased risks or unpredictable behaviour.⁵ For example, alcohol can magnify the effect of sleeping pills, tranquilisers, cold remedies and cannabis.

Possession and use of illicit drugs is illegal and may lead to heavy penalties including prison sentences. The use of these drugs in the workplace is not acceptable.

Prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications are not usually a concern for employers, and most employees would not need to notify their supervisor if taking these drugs. However, side effects from some of these drugs can result in symptoms such as drowsiness, which may be of concern when people are operating heavy machinery, driving or working at heights. It may also be of concern if employees are using medication prescribed for someone else. Employers should promote open communication with employees so that potential impacts of medication on workplace safety can be identified, and so employees can be encouraged to consult with their doctor regarding alternate medications if appropriate.



Is there a culture or history of alcohol and drug use in your workplace?

For more information on the effect of alcohol and drug use in the workplace, download the following resource from this CD-ROM or from the *Good health. Good business.* website at www.workcover.tas.gov.au/goodhealthgoodbusiness



The effect of alcohol and drug use in the workplace



A healthy workplace is good for business

If one of your employees has an alcohol or drug problem, they may:

- have impaired job performance, including higher-than-usual rates of mistakes or inefficiencies
- have increased absenteeism
- have poor time-keeping skills
- show changes in concentration and energy
- have sudden mood changes
- be increasingly tired at work.⁶

There may also be signs of decreased morale or cooperation between employees.

From a company-wide perspective, you need to be alert to signs of alcohol or other drugs being kept on the worksite. This may be in the form of employees displaying risky behaviours, or even employees having disciplinary or conduct problems. You also need to be aware of legal responsibilities and implications if your company knows that employees are using illicit drugs.

It's important to recognise that these signs can be related to other illnesses or even stress, and may have nothing to do with alcohol and drug use.

There is no common stereotype of someone who is using alcohol or drugs inappropriately. Investigate a matter fully and cautiously before coming to any conclusions.

WHAT CAN I DO TO ADDRESS ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS IN MY WORKPLACE?

There are many factors that may cause someone to use alcohol or drugs at an inappropriate level. Using alcohol and drugs can make us feel better at coping, help us unwind or make us forget concerning issues. Workplace-specific factors that can contribute to an employee using alcohol or drugs may include:

- tight deadlines
- shift work
- job insecurity or uncertainty
- workplace changes.



Are these factors present in your workplace?

Personal factors can also contribute to the use of alcohol or drugs, including:

- stresses resulting from relationship difficulties
- family or personal illness
- financial pressures
- difficulty sleeping.

For more information on these issues, see Section 06D *Social and emotional wellbeing*.

Employers can adopt a wide range of strategies to deal with potential alcohol and drug issues. These may involve general preventative measures around reducing alcohol or drug consumption, or more specific strategies that address identified issues. Early intervention for alcohol and other drug problems is always preferable.

The following table lists some example strategies that may help you address alcohol and drug issues in your workplace. Remember, it's a good idea to use a mix of activities that cover people, place and policy.

	Examples of activities targeting alcohol and drug issues	People	Place	Policy
👍	Identify and address factors in the workplace that may be contributing to the inappropriate use of alcohol and other drugs		✓	
👍	Display information on safe alcohol consumption guidelines		✓	
👍	Display information on the effects of illicit and prescription drugs		✓	
👍	At work functions where alcohol is provided, also provide food and non-alcoholic drinks		✓	
👍	Offer a safe travel alternative after functions where alcohol has been consumed (for example, 'Cabcharge' vouchers)	✓		
👍	Include information on safer levels of alcohol consumption in other health and wellbeing messages		✓	
👍	Refer employees to the Tasmanian Drug and Alcohol Service for information, advice, counselling and referral to treatment services (Ph: 1800 811 994)	✓		
👍	Develop a workplace alcohol and drug policy			✓
👍+	Provide in-house information sessions on low-risk drinking behaviour	✓		
👍+	Provide in-house information sessions on the effects of illicit and prescription drugs	✓		
👍+	Encourage employees to self-refer to the Employee Assistance Provider (EAP), where available	✓		
👍+	Refer employees to specific alcohol and drug treatment programs	✓		
👍+	Provide assistance to employee family members with alcohol and other drug issues	✓		



A healthy workplace is good for business



This symbol indicates an easy or low-resource activity.



This symbol indicates a more comprehensively resourced activity.

WHAT CAN I DO TO ADDRESS ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS IN MY WORKPLACE?

The workplace is an ideal environment in which to run effective alcohol and drug support programs. Workers have a better chance to recover from alcohol and drug problems while they are still working, and the peer support network within a workplace can help shape individual behaviour.⁷

One of your strategies might be to develop and implement an alcohol and drug policy. This is a formal written document, developed in consultation with employees, that outlines what a workplace expects of its employees with regard to alcohol and drug use. It also outlines what employees can expect of their employers with regard to alcohol and drug issues if they arise in the workplace.

For more information on creating an alcohol and drug policy for the workplace, download the following resource from this CD-ROM or from the *Good health. Good business.* website at www.workcovertas.gov.au/goodhealthgoodbusiness



Alcohol and drug policy

What are the issues around confidentiality and helping employees?

It is important that you and your employees are aware of confidentiality issues surrounding the identification of alcohol and drug problems. Employers have a duty of care to protect the privacy of individuals in this circumstance,

and if confidentiality or trust is breached, employees may be reluctant to engage in seeking help in the future.

Sometimes it may seem obvious that one of your employees has an alcohol or drug problem, while another employee may go to great pains to hide the issue. Either way, alcohol or drug problems need to be treated with sensitivity and care. Put aside all judgements and preconceived opinions and deal with the facts. Recognise that there may be many factors that influence behaviour, and only some of these can be directly managed within the workplace.

If you are unsure of how to handle the issue, ask for help from your Human Resources department, or check the *Where to go for more information – Alcohol and other drugs* fact sheet.

What about alcohol and drug testing?

There is growing interest in alcohol and drug testing as a strategy for managing workplace alcohol and drug issues. There is a range of testing programs, including pre-employment screening, random testing, and testing following an accident or near miss. Ideally, the primary aim of a testing program is to identify employees that pose a safety risk to themselves or others as a result of alcohol or drug use.

Alcohol and drug testing may have limited application in some worksites. For example, many testing programs are restricted in their ability to test for impairment. A positive drug test may only indicate that the individual has been exposed to a specific drug at some time in the past, not that the individual is currently under the effects of that drug. Conversely, a negative alcohol test does not detect the effects of a hangover, which may be just as likely to impair workplace safety or productivity.

Testing can also be expensive and may impact adversely on employee morale when used as a random method on non-drug using employees. Employees may see testing as a breach of trust and privacy. Alcohol and other drug testing must always be voluntary in the workplace.

In general, the effectiveness of workplace testing in deterring alcohol and drug use and improving workplace safety is controversial.⁸



A healthy workplace is good for business

HOW DO I KNOW IF OUR PROGRAM HAS BEEN A SUCCESS?

The best way to find out if your program has been a success is to look at the impact of any changes you have made to your worksite. It's a good idea to work out how you are going to do this early on, so you can ask the right questions and collect the right information.

It is essential to collect some information before you start your program, for example:

- What percentage of employees currently consume alcohol at levels that may be exposing them to alcohol-related harm?
- What percentage of employees regularly choose to have alcohol-free periods?
- What percentage of employees use illicit drugs?
- What percentage of employees use legal drugs illicitly?

This data will only be useful if it matches your program and its objectives. For example, if the majority of your employees report drinking at high levels on sporadic single occasions, it may be more useful to concentrate on this as a health issue.

The baseline data you collect will be essential when you come to evaluate your program, as you can ask the same questions and see whether the figures are different. Then you will be able to identify whether you need to change your program to provide better support to your employees.

There are many questions you can ask that will help you evaluate your program, including:

- Is there understanding among your employees of the health consequences of alcohol consumption?
 - Are employees aware of the national guidelines for reducing alcohol-related harm?
 - What levels of alcohol consumption do your employees feel is safe?

- Are your employees aware of the support offered as part of your program?
 - What is the level of employee participation in your program?
- Can you see that employees and visitors have accepted the requirements of your alcohol and drug policy (if applicable)?
 - Is there evidence of alcohol or other drug consumption on site (for example, empty packaging)?
 - What are employees saying about the policy and the expectation that they comply with its requirements?
 - Is there any resistance to the policy?
- What has been the effect of the program on employees?
 - Has the percentage of employees that consume alcohol at levels that may be exposing them to alcohol-related harm changed since implementation (needs baseline data)?
 - What do your employees think about the program (do they think it has been effective)?

How you collect this information will differ depending on your organisation's size and regional spread. There is a range of data collection methods that you could try, such as surveys, interviews and discussion groups. Be mindful that this information is very personal in nature, and getting accurate results may be difficult. You will need to ensure confidentiality, which may make an employee survey the most reasonable approach.

For more information on evaluating your program, download the following fact sheet from the *Good Health. Good Business.* website at www.workcover.tas.gov.au/goodhealthgoodbusiness



A simple guide to evaluation



A healthy workplace is good for business

HOW HAVE OTHERS DONE IT?



'As a family-oriented business, we genuinely care for the wellbeing of our staff.'

*— Lisa Burnell, owner
Ronald Young and Co Builders*

Ronald Young and Co Builders

Ronald Young and Co Builders are a family-owned and operated residential building company. In business since 1970, the company has 10 full-time employees based in Hobart, and engages around 50 contractors for a variety of projects. Since taking over 18 months ago, new owners Paul and Lisa Burnell have taken staff health and wellbeing seriously.

Working in the construction industry, Paul and Lisa recognise that alcohol consumption can be a potential issue in the workplace. As Lisa is also a trained nurse, she understands the practical necessity of caring for employee health.

One of the first tasks Lisa undertook as a new owner was to create a drug and alcohol policy and a safe driving policy. These policies were developed using templates from WorkCover Tasmania and WorkSafe Victoria. Along with other policies which aim to minimise hazards and improve safety, these policies state that there is a zero tolerance of alcohol or drugs for employees when driving, while working for or representing the company.



A healthy workplace is good for business

HOW HAVE OTHERS DONE IT?

Importantly, the drug and alcohol policy also states that the privacy of the individual is to be maintained at all times if a breach of this policy is detected.

Work-based social or training events always have a low focus on alcohol. For example, at team get-togethers, low-alcohol and non-alcoholic drinks are served, along with plenty of healthy food options. Limiting the length of time of these events also encourages employees to head home, rather than continue to socialise where alcohol is served. Traditional Friday night drinks are rare – company culture encourages Friday evenings as family time for employees.

The company also has two special functions per year, to say thank you to staff for their contributions. Again, alcohol is a low focus for these events, and it is recognised that there is shared responsibility between the employer and employee for safe transport after these events.

With the assistance of WorkCover's Health and Wellbeing Advisors, Ronald Young and Co have also made great progress in supporting their staff to eat well and keep hydrated. Paul, Lisa and their employees participate in and are committed to their health and wellbeing program.



WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

There are several organisations that can assist employers and employees with information on alcohol and drug use in the workplace.

For a list of these organisations, download the following resource from this CD-ROM or from the *Good health. Good business.* website at www.workcovertas.gov.au/goodhealthgoodbusiness



Where to go for more information – Alcohol and other drugs

REFERENCES

1. Pidd, K, Roche, A & Buisman-Pijlman, F 2011, 'Intoxicated workers: findings from a national Australian survey', *Addiction*, vol. 106, pp. 1623-1633.
2. Pidd, K, Berry J, Harrison J, Roche A, Driscoll T & Newson R 2006, *Alcohol and work: patterns of use, workplace culture and safety*, Injury Research and Statistics Series Number 28, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.
3. National Health and Medical Research Council 2009, *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol*, Australian Government.
4. Department of Health and Human Services 2011, *Everybody's business: A discussion paper for the development of a Tasmanian alcohol, tobacco and other drugs promotions, prevention and early intervention strategic framework*, Tasmanian Government, Hobart.
5. National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction 2006, *Fact sheet 1: Alcohol and Work*, Adelaide, available from www.nceta.flinders.edu.au/workplace/resources_and_publications/workplace-aod-fact-sheets
6. WorkCover Tasmania 2010, *Drugs and alcohol – A guide for employers and workers*.
7. WorkCover Corporation of South Australia 2001, *Guidelines for Drugs, Alcohol and the Workplace*.
8. Pidd, K, Roche, A & White, M 2011, *Workplace Drug and Alcohol Testing*, National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction, Flinders University, Adelaide.

