



# Opioid Use in the Workplace

Companies and organizations of all sizes have an important role managing risks in the workplace and promoting the safety and health of their employees. Strong workplace policies, health benefit programs and education create safe and healthy environments in which employees and business can thrive.

The coverage of prescription medication in healthcare benefit packages, when used wisely and correctly, can contribute to favorable treatment outcomes and quality of life. However, a disturbing trend driven by the use and abuse of opioid painkillers in the workplace is something that poses a unique challenge for employers and deserves attention.

## What is an Opioid?

Opioids are a class of prescription narcotic medication derived from the same plant as heroin. Despite the significant increase in the use of opioid medications during the last decade, a recent Institute of Medicine report showed that little progress has been made in the treatment of pain.

## What is the Impact of Opioid Use on the Workplace?

Opioid medications are powerful, highly addictive drugs that have the potential to cause impairment and increase the risk of workplace incidents, errors and injuries, even when taken as prescribed. Data confirms that prescription painkillers also profoundly increase workers' compensation costs, increase the length of worker disability and increase the amount of work time lost. While illegal drug use has historically been a primary focus, it is now important to include prescription drugs in workplace policies.

## What Should Employers Do?

In addition to structuring pharmacy programs to include managed utilization for opioid use, employers should invest in education for management and employees as an essential best practice to reduce corporate exposure and risk. The following areas are key when sharing information about opioid medications:

- **Be informed at the point of prescribing** – Employees should know and understand the risks associated with taking an opioid painkiller as soon as a prescriber recommends it. They should feel confident to work with their prescriber to determine if a non-opioid prescription can be used.
- **Understand the potential impact on driving or using heavy equipment** – State laws vary in their handling of “driving while impaired from prescription drugs.” In the majority of states, an individual can receive a DUI citation even if he or she is driving under the influence of a legitimately prescribed medication.
- **Encourage employees to seek help for dependency and addiction** – Employees taking opioids may become dependent more quickly than they realize. Their medical provider and/or company Employee Assistance Program (EAP) are valuable resources for getting help.

Evidence demonstrates that opioid use poses serious risks to employees and can incur substantial costs for employers. If you would like additional information about this topic, a [Scott Risk Advisor](#) will help you identify potential areas of concern.