



Supervisor Newsletter

Increased Meth Use at Work

Over the past several years, methamphetamine (meth) production by Mexican cartels has reached a new level of purity and availability.

After the U.S. passed the *Combat Methamphetamine Act* in 2005, making the ingredients for producing meth difficult to obtain, Mexican drug cartels stepped in and began working to produce a purer form of the drug at a lower price. They succeeded, and have now inundated the market with so much low-cost meth that the supply far exceeds the demand. There is so much meth available that drug dealers are even offering it to customers on credit.

The methamphetamine problem has been overshadowed in the media by the opioid epidemic, but meth is still more abused worldwide than cocaine and heroin combined. And as with all other drugs, when use among the general public increases, there is an increase in abuse of the drug in the workplace.

In 2001, methamphetamine overtook heroin as the number one reason people were entering drug treatment. Eventually, narcotic painkiller and heroin use outpaced meth as the opioid epidemic gained national attention. But at the current rate, methamphetamine will once again become America's number one drug of choice and employers will once again have to deal with all of the problems it brings to the workplace.

Not all industries have experienced the effects of increased meth use yet, as the rate of meth use is higher in the construction and manufacturing

industries. But whether it is white-collar or blue-collar, service industry or manufacturing, in rural or urban locations—methamphetamine does not discriminate. Once again, no workplace will be immune from meth.

As meth use at work continues to increase, it will become even more important for supervisors to receive training on how to identify and react appropriately to the wide range of methamphetamine hazards in the workplace.

Why the Appeal?

Why is methamphetamine such a popular drug in the workplace? Some workers use meth to stay alert during long hours of repetitive work. A number of people even think of methamphetamine as just a harmless way to stay awake during a boring work shift. There are those who stir meth into their coffee before work and in sodas throughout the day. Others have begun smoking and vaping the drug with special pipes and vape pens in order to avoid detection.

Methamphetamine is a powerful stimulant. A single dose of meth can keep a person high for up to fourteen hours. Users claim that meth makes them feel more confident and able to do an entire day's work in a few hours.

Meth users do feel an initial rush immediately after taking the drug, but when the rush eventually wears off, the user is left with a period of intense agitation that can sometimes result in unstable and violent behavior. Erratic behavior, accidents, increased sick days, and higher health care costs are side-effects of meth use at work.

Methamphetamine Dangers

With even the smallest amounts of methamphetamine, effects on the central nervous system include increased wakefulness, increased physical activity, decreased appetite, increased respiration, hypothermia, and euphoria. Opposite effects include extreme irritability, insomnia, confused thoughts, body tremors, dehydration, convulsions, a sense of paranoia, and aggressiveness.

A major concern of meth use at work is the time when the user begins to come down from the high, known as the tweaking phase. It can cause feelings of anxiety and emptiness, resulting in extreme irritability and paranoia. There may be unpredictable and dangerous behavior exhibited when or if the person is startled, confused, or confronted. For all of these reasons and more, methamphetamine by nature has the potential to increase workplace violence. Workplace violence may be verbal or physical, but it is more likely to be physical with a meth user. All in all, this is not what a supervisor would want to expect from a worker out on the warehouse or office floor.

Methamphetamine also increases heart rate and blood pressure, which can cause irreversible damage to blood vessels in the brain and produce strokes. Other effects of methamphetamine include respiratory problems, irregular heartbeat, and anorexia. Meth users can experience sudden cardiovascular collapse and even death.

The withdrawal symptoms for high-dose users can include severe depression, picking at the skin, and violent and erratic behavior.

Methamphetamine has a neurotoxin effect on the brain. The drug damages brain cells that contain serotonin and dopamine, chemicals that affect emotions, behavior, and thought. With the use of meth over a long period of time, the body will eventually shut down production of dopamine, resulting in symptoms like those of Parkinson's disease.

The Cost of Meth in the Workplace

There are a number of ways methamphetamine negatively affects businesses. Use of methamphetamine by workers results in more absenteeism, higher rates of illness, increased accidents, lost productivity, and overall lower employee morale. And as with other substance abuse problems in the workplace, meth use causes a rise in workers' compensation claims and higher healthcare costs for the company. One study in Arkansas found that meth-addicted employees cost each business in Benton County more than \$47,000 annually.

Methamphetamine use is a fast-growing problem in the workplace. It is beginning to appear that when the opioid epidemic finally comes to an end, methamphetamine will once again become the American workplace's next drug abuse crisis.

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