



Are you ready for **CANNABIS** in the workplace?

The terms “cannabis”, “legalization”, and “decriminalization” have become front-page news. It feels as if everyone in Canada is getting ready for the huge impact that will be caused by the coming invasion of legal marijuana.

Certainly, the statistics from some US states that have legalized recreational marijuana are a cause for concern, especially the increase in motor-vehicle incidents. But let’s remember that the use of marijuana in our workplaces is not new.

Employers across Ontario have been expressing concern that the use of cannabis—either medical or recreational—will result in more employees coming to work under the influence. Companies that perform high-hazard work are especially concerned because their employees must be more safety-conscious.

If your current workplace health and safety policies and procedures do not address cannabis in the workplace or are inadequate to handle the issues that come along with it, you may be exposing your workers to more hazards than you realize. The use of cannabis in the workplace is merely part of a much broader class of workplace hazards: **impairment**.

Impairment in the workplace

Generally speaking, impairment is a state of reduced competence, or reduced physical or mental ability, which can lead to an injury, illness, or incident. The Canadian Human Rights Commission describes the appearance of impairment at work as “*odour of alcohol or drugs, glassy or red eyes, unsteady gait, slurring, poor coordination.*”

Impairment

Being in an imperfect or weakened state or condition; Unable to function normally or safely (as when operating a motor vehicle) because of intoxication by alcohol or drugs.

— Merriam-Webster dictionary

When most people think of impairment, alcohol and drugs mainly come to mind. Although they may be the most obvious examples, impairment can be caused by many substances and also by events. Basically, any substance or event that results in a lack of concentration, an inability to complete a task, or an inability to solve problems or make decisions can cause impairment.

These effects can even be caused by life stresses such as divorce, illness, or expecting a baby. Or they can be caused by the side-effects of medication (e.g., dizziness or nausea) or by lack of sleep. These forms of impairment all fall into the same category as alcohol and drug use, but they aren't always taken into consideration. If an organization is developing a policy that just deals with drugs and alcohol, other forms of impairment will be left out.

Impairment or “fit-for-duty” policy

If employers already have policies and procedures that address all sources of impairment or fitness for work, the legalization of cannabis should not really affect workplace health and safety. It is simply

necessary to broaden the definition of impairment and widen the focus on causes beyond drugs and alcohol.

The positive side to all the media coverage about cannabis is that it's creating the opportunity to discuss the subject of impairment with everyone. In fact, clear communication between all groups in a workplace about the importance of a safe and healthy work environment is one of the things that will reduce the impact of impairment in the workplace.

Policies should also be applied fairly and consistently, and both supervisors and employees need to be trained so that they will know what their responsibilities are for dealing with any source of impairment.

Although the topic of cannabis in the workplace is prominent in the news, the subject of impairment on the job is not new. Everyone in a workplace, especially those performing high-risk work activities, should have clear guidance and services to assist with impairment.

The end goal in all of this is to reduce any fears or stigma surrounding the subject of workplace impairment, and to provide workplaces that are accommodating, healthy, and safe.

What makes a good impairment policy?

1. It encourages a culture that prioritizes safety and allows for conversations about hazards like impairment.
2. It states clearly whether or not employees are allowed to use, possess, or be under the influence of certain substances while at work.
3. It is jointly developed by labour and management, including the Joint Health and Safety Committee.
4. It should specify the many sources of impairment, such as alcohol, medications (used legally or illegally), cannabis (recreational or therapeutic), any other substance, and conditions like fatigue or stress.
5. It ensures that all employees know and understand the definitions and sources of impairment.
6. It allows for education and training to be provided to all employees, including supervisors.
7. It defines the mechanism for reporting impairment and specifies how confidentiality will be maintained.
8. It gives employees the opportunity to declare if they feel they may be impaired, and specifies that such a statement can be made in confidence and without fear of stigma or reprisal.
9. It includes prevention initiatives and employee support programs such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
10. It states how disciplinary actions will be conducted when they are necessary.

