

Opioids are a class of drugs that include the illegal drug heroin, synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, and pain relievers available legally by prescription, including oxycodone (OxyContin®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), codeine, and morphine.

Opioid overdoses and deaths are a public health crisis affecting many working Canadians. Using alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, and other substances can also negatively affect employees, their families, and workplaces.

Explain dangers

Workers in construction are particularly vulnerable to opioid addiction and the harms it can cause. The reasons why are complex, but the need for pain management, a “work hard, play hard” culture, and social stigma are significant factors.

In 2020, at least 2,500 Ontarians died of drug overdoses. This represented a 60% increase from Ontario’s 1,500 opioid-related deaths in 2019. Of the victims who were employed, 30% worked in construction, making it by far the most impacted industry.

Identify controls

Stigma is a set of negative attitudes or beliefs about a person, group of people, or circumstance. It has a significant impact on the experiences of people with substance-use disorders and how they’re treated in the workplace. The stigma associated with addiction can be a barrier to seeking help.

Take these important steps to help reduce stigma:

- Remember that addiction is a treatable medical condition, not a choice. It is deserving of care just like any other medical condition.
- Ask yourself if your attitudes and behaviours have been influenced by negative stereotypes, stories, and images about drug users.
- Do not define any person by their drug use.
- Be respectful, compassionate, and caring to those who use drugs.

Some ways to support at-risk coworkers:

- Be a bridge between your coworker and the appropriate sources of professional help.
- Act quickly. The earlier a problem is found and treated, the better. If you’re concerned but do nothing, the problem could get worse.
- You don’t need to diagnose or counsel your coworker. Your honest support may be enough to motivate them to seek counselling.

If your coworker’s personal problems put workplace safety at risk, you must take action to safeguard your coworker, yourself, and your fellow workers.

Take immediate action when:

- You suspect your coworker may be impaired by alcohol or drugs—such as opioids—while at work.
- You believe a coworker is not fit for work. You don’t have to know the specific reason that they are unfit for work or potentially unsafe. Report your concerns to a supervisor, who should then take appropriate action.

This can be a tough step to take. You may feel like you’re betraying a friend. But remember that your decision can save lives. Your actions are part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Demonstrate

Describe the signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose, which include:

- Slow, weak breathing, or not breathing at all
- Blue lips or nails
- Dizziness or confusion
- Choking, gurgling, or snoring sounds
- Drowsiness or difficulty staying awake.

Talk to workers about **naloxone**, a drug that can temporarily stop the effects of opioids and help restore breathing during an overdose. Find out where to get a free naloxone kit (and learn how to use it) at Ontario.ca/naloxone. Let your workers know who at the workplace has been trained and is authorized to administer this life-saving drug.