

Creating a supportive culture surrounding opioid use

A supportive and inclusive workplace can have a positive impact on the well-being of workers who are struggling with addiction, substance use, or mental health issues. This means that workers should feel comfortable disclosing and discussing these issues with you, without fear of punishment or judgment.

Explain dangers

The opioid crisis affects all Canadians, but disproportionately impacts men and workers in the trades. Consider these statistics from the Institute for Work and Health, Health Canada, and the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB):

- Since 2016, three out of four opioid-related deaths in Canada have been men, and 30 to 50 per cent of those who were employed at the time of their death worked in a trade.
- Between 2018 and 2021, 336 Ontario construction workers lost their lives due to an opioid overdose—an average of 91 workers per year. In comparison, WSIB data show that about 20 Ontario workers per year suffer traumatic deaths on construction sites.
- Men account for about 75 per cent of opioid-related deaths in Canada. 92.8 per cent of tradespeople in Ontario were male in Ontario as of 2022, according to the WSIB.

Identify controls

- Recognize that stigma—negative attitudes or beliefs about a person or group—is common toward people who use or misuse opioids. Stigma can cause people who use opioids to not seek help, which could make their condition worse. To eliminate this stigma in the workplace, educate yourself and your workers about substance use and addiction.
- Challenge your beliefs and biases around opioid use and opioid addiction. Keep an open mind, ask questions, and look to be part of the solution, not the problem.

- Learn more about the risks and impacts of opioid use in trade industries and what you can do to help make a difference on the ground level.
- Implement policies and procedures that address mental health, substance use, fit for work, and other important topics impacting worker health. It is also important for all workers to follow these policies and procedures and offer feedback when they need changes for improvement.
- Remember that even workplaces with the best policies and training must rely on having workers with a genuine interest in caring for one another on the job. Building a supportive culture starts with each and everyone of us. Challenge yourself to be one of those workers. You could be the one to save a life.

Demonstrate

- Ask workers to identify common stereotypes and biases surrounding opioid use—and how they might be harmful.
- Discuss alternatives to language surrounding opioid use and people who use substances (e.g., “druggo,” “junkie,” etc.) that can be derogatory or stigmatizing.
- Ask workers if they are aware of the substance use, fit for work, and mental health policies and procedures at your workplace. Ask them to describe how these items could be changed to better support workers who may be experiencing substance use issues.
- Refer workers to IHSA’s [online mental health resources](#), such as our [Opioid crisis in the trades toolkit](#) and [FAQs about naloxone kits in workplaces guide](#) (W135).
- Identify the workplace resources and supports that are available for people who may be struggling with opioids or mental health concerns. Ensure workers know how to access these resources.
- Use this resource with others from IHSA to create a space where it is “okay” for workers to speak up and talk openly about the challenges they face.