

Impairment at the workplace

Many people believe that the decriminalization of cannabis will lead to an increase in workers being impaired at the workplace.

We often think of impairment as a result of using substances such as alcohol or drugs— whether they are over-the-counter, prescription, or illicit. However, impairment can result from other things such as:

- Family or relationship problems
- Fatigue (mental or physical)
- Traumatic shock
- Medical conditions or treatments.

These are all situations that may impair a person from focusing on their tasks at work.

Explain dangers

Impairment is a state of reduced physical or mental ability. No matter what the reason is, when workers are impaired on the job, it can have serious consequences such as:

- Workplace incidents and injuries
- Absenteeism
- Reduced quality of work
- Strain on work relationships
- Decline in physical, emotional, and mental health.

This is why impairment in the workplace must be managed as a potential workplace hazard.

Identify controls

The most important way to reduce the impact of impairment on the workplace is to have a proper policy and response procedure in place. The policy must include clear guidance on how to handle known or suspected impairment at work.

This policy and response procedure should cover what to do in any situation, regardless of the cause of impairment. The policy should be communicated to all workers.

If you become aware of an employee who is showing signs of impairment, it is very important to take action immediately.

Signs of impairment can vary based on the individual and the type of impairment:

- Signs of substance use can include the odour of alcohol or drugs, glassy or red eyes, poor coordination, or slurring.
- Signs of impairment from fatigue, stress, medical conditions, or relationship problems can include changes in appearance, performance, and behaviour.

Examples of actions to take in the case of suspected impairment at work include the following:

- Call for first aid or emergency medical assistance, if necessary.
- Notify a supervisor who can speak to the employee in a private area to discuss their behaviour. Another supervisor or designated person should be present as a witness.
- If necessary, call a taxi or have the employee escorted home. Do not allow them to drive themselves if you suspect impairment.

If a worker feels that they themselves are impaired, they should immediately notify a supervisor or designated person, who will assist them confidentially.

Demonstrate

Ask your crew if they know any other causes and signs of impairment.

Review your company's impairment policy and response procedure with them.

Explain how impairment will be handled at your workplace. (Depending on your company's impairment policy, this could include such things as having a conversation about the situation, removing a worker from the jobsite, discussing treatment options, or taking disciplinary action.)

NOTE: If your company does not have an impairment policy in place, download a sample one from ihsa.ca (See *IHSA.ca Magazine*, Volume 18, Issue 2.)