

Look Inside for Details

By Don Teater, M.D.* and Tess Benham
National Safety Council

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Prescription opioids carry substantial risks

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The prescribing of opioid painkillers is becoming more common – and more dangerous – so increased awareness is necessary, particularly in the workplace. By being aware of the problems and committed to preventing it, companies can play a decisive role in the well-being of New Jersey's citizens.

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Among the risks that New Jersey residents face on a daily basis is one that might be somewhat surprising, but it's there, with impact across generations and with implications in a variety of settings. It can be found in your medicine cabinet.

Opioid painkillers, issued in amber vials at pharmacies big and small, are being overprescribed. The availability of these kinds of painkillers has created a virtual epidemic, one that kills dozens of people every day through overdoses and while leaving millions of people facing painkiller use disorders.

The scope of the prescription opioid problem can become even more frightening when one considers how common it might be for someone to be under the influence of painkillers while driving a school bus, serving as a medical professional, or operating machinery. In New Jersey and across the nation, opioid pain medications are intended as part of medical treatment, but instead they develop dependencies and serve as a gateway to other drugs.

New Jersey recorded 1,264 drug overdose deaths in 2014. Of those, 424 were heroin overdoses, but 369 were from prescription opioids, and the link between heroin and opioids is well documented: Four out of five new heroin users started by

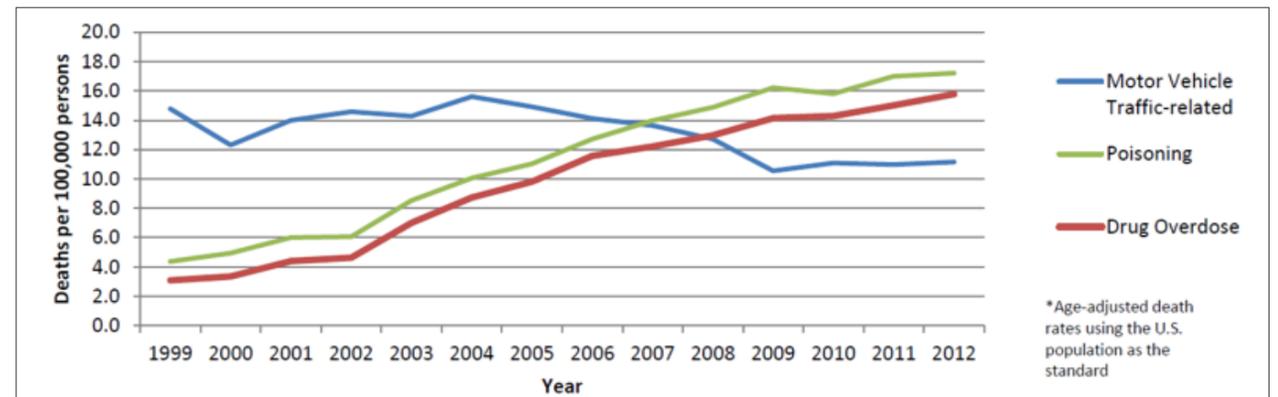
misusing prescription opioids. And the problem is growing. In New Jersey, hospital admissions for prescription opioid abuse have been rising steadily, climbing by more than 800 percent between 2001 and 2012.



Drug overdoses now cause more deaths than car crashes, and prescription painkillers contribute to more deaths than any other type of drugs.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The impact of prescription opioids isn't limited to New Jersey. On a national scale, there are 52 deaths every day from opioids. Overdose deaths from prescription opioids exceeded the totals for heroin and cocaine deaths combined in 2014, and about 6.5 million people reported using prescription drugs in ways other than prescribed.



Drug overdose death rates compared to motor vehicle-related death rates, Indiana residents, 1999-2012

To the west, in the state of Indiana, there also has been a steady trend upward for overdose deaths, which increased fivefold since 1999; at the same time, the Indiana motor vehicle traffic-related death rate fell 25 percent. That poisoning and drug overdose death rates could leap so quickly while the third fell depicts the changing nature of risk in this day and age.

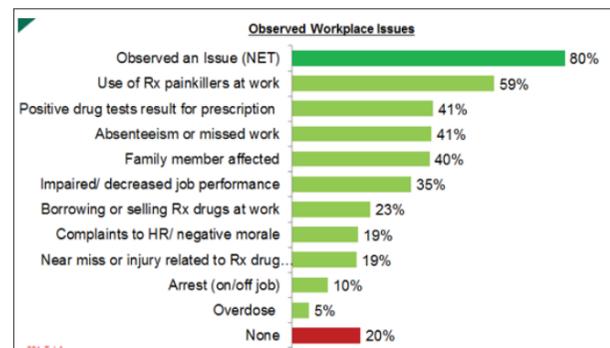
EMPLOYERS SURVEYED ABOUT PRESCRIPTION PAINKILLERS

The National Safety Council teamed up last year with Indiana Attorney General Greg Zoeller and the state's Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Task Force (BitterPill.IN.gov) to learn more about how the prescription drug epidemic was impacting Indiana's business community. Indiana employers were surveyed about prescription painkillers and their impact on the companies. The results showed a range of different perceptions, but the most telling might have been this: 80 percent of employers recognized that their workforce has been impacted by prescription opioids. Further, 64 percent said that prescription painkillers were a bigger problem in their workplaces than illegal drugs.

In a workplace, misuse or abuse of prescription medication can affect productivity or contribute to errors being made in an employee's work. But more importantly, the effects of these medications can reduce employees' ability to safely work, or drive as part of their jobs. Not unexpectedly, the survey confirmed this, with one in five companies reported seeing a near miss or an injury attributable to prescription medication misuse or abuse.

Other relevant results from the survey were:

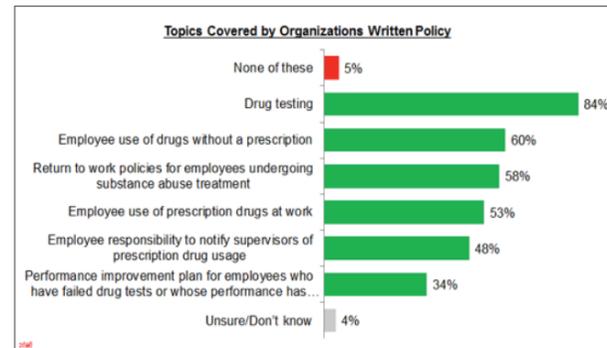
- 41 percent of respondents attributed absenteeism or missed work to prescription medications
- 35 percent blamed medications for impaired or decreased job performance
- 23 percent reported being aware of prescription medications being borrowed or sold on company grounds.



But while the impact of prescription medications seems clear, Indiana companies reported that day to day business concerns demanded their attention and overshadowed this problem. They also acknowledged a general absence of policies and practices aimed at blunting the impact and protecting employees.

Prescription medications were a "major concern" for only

29 percent of businesses surveyed, while such issues as absenteeism, worker comp costs and the aging of the workforce were assessed as more significant concerns. Further, among the companies, only 53 percent had a written policy regarding the use of prescription medications at work. And while 4 out of 5 companies conducted drug testing, only 52 percent used drug screenings that tested for opioids such as oxycodone.



Beyond the existence of general policies is the more fundamental practice of first identifying a problem and then appropriately addressing it. Companies that equipped to do both are far better positioned to respond to this growing concern than those that aren't. But the Indiana survey found that nearly two thirds of companies surveyed were not confident in the ability of their personnel to recognize the signs of prescription medication abuse. Further, among those surveyed, less than a third provide their supervisors with the training necessary to identify abuse.

Even assuming that the companies are able to recognize cases where personnel have developed a problem, what are they prepared to do? Barely a third of the companies had a performance improvement plan in place for employees who have failed drug tests or have seen performance decline as a result of abuse.

Collectively, the statistics for the nation and for New Jersey, alongside the survey results, show that too many employers are not well prepared to respond prescription drug abuse in the workplace. NSC, though, is trying to help.

SOLUTIONS NEED TO COME FROM MANY PLACES

The National Safety Council, like the Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey, is one of many voices working to reduce the harm that can come from prescription painkiller abuse; working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other federal and state agencies, the Council is advancing changes in prescribing guidelines for physicians while also calling for greater use of Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs. Our efforts have not been limited to making recommendations; we also have developed tools that employers can use to address the problem.

Companies can take advantage of the free Prescription Drug Employer Kit available at nsc.org/rxemployerpolicy.

Among other topics, the Council-developed kit addresses:

- Opioid painkillers and their impact on worker safety
- How companies can create a drug free workplace program that includes prescription painkiller use and misuse.
- Tools to examine and update your drug free workplace and employee benefit programs
- Fact sheets and handouts with helpful information to educate your employees
- Poster series focused on home safety and disposal

Companies can also consult with their benefit and health care providers to improve how benefit plans can protect employees by identifying dangerous prescribing combinations and suspicious prescribing patterns. Simple steps like medical review and prior approval could potentially both reduce the likelihood of employees becoming dependent on opioid pain medication and could also result in measureable savings to the companies.

Being alert to some unfortunate truths about prescription opioids also can make a difference. Injured workers who are prescribed even one opioid have average total claim costs four times greater than similar claims, for instance, and receiving more than a one-week supply of opioids soon after an injury doubles a worker's risk of disability one year later. Knowing these facts can help a company shape its health plans to better protect workers' health and prevent prescription opioid abuse.

Another critical step a New Jersey company can take to protect itself and its employees would be to reassess its Employee Assistance Program to make certain that it offers information and services related to substance abuse prevention, treatment and return to work issues. Research has shown that employer-initiated substance abuse

A Costly Issue
Prescription drugs account for about **19%** of worker's compensation medical costs.

In 2009, Oxycodone was the top drug in worker's compensation, as measured by dollars paid.

treatment has more successful outcomes than treatment initiated by the criminal justice system or their families.

Other proactive steps companies can take include incorporating information about substance abuse in workplace wellness programs or strategies, educating employees about the health and productivity issues related to prescription drug abuse, and learning the seven drug compounds to include in their drug testing panel.

The problem of prescription opioid abuse is a complex one, a problem with no single solution. Solving it will require changes in the medical community, in health care, and in how individuals care for themselves. Companies that recognize their employees as critical resources, however, and who choose to commit to their well being can have a remarkable impact, one felt by their employees, their customers, and their communities.

- Partner immediately with your prescription and health plan providers** to help gate-keep, monitor and intervene on the use of these prescription drugs.
- Revise your Drug-Free Workplace Policy to protect your employees and reduce liability.** Require employees to report their use of prescription medications that can **cause drowsiness or impairment.**
- Ensure that employee drug testing** includes the most commonly prescribed **opioid painkiller drugs.**
- Remind employees of **confidential help available** through an **Employee Assistance Program.**
- Educate employees about **safe storage of these medications,** proper disposal and **risks of sharing these powerful drugs.**

About the Authors

Dr. Donald Teater, M.D. is the Medical Advisor for the National Safety Council. He has worked intensively with opioid and mental health treatment and recovery for more than 10 years and runs an addiction clinic in western North Carolina.

Tess Benham is a Senior Program Manager overseeing the National Safety Council's Prescription Drug Overdose Initiative. The initiative coordinates with prescribers and insurance organizations to reduce the supply of opioids in the community and works with legislators to push for policy change to reduce supply and increase drug treatment opportunities.

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