



Introduction

Introduction/Overview

With all the emphasis on the “war on drugs,” we sometimes underestimate the damage done by a legal and common drug: alcohol.

There’s nothing wrong with a sociable drink; some researchers even say a glass of wine may be good for your health. But excessive drinking can destroy your health. And you’re not the only one at risk if you perform your job while under the influence of alcohol. That can be dangerous, even deadly, to you and others around you. That’s why drug-free workplace programs generally cover alcohol and why using alcohol at work—or working under its influence—is strictly prohibited here.

This applies to all jobs. Alcohol affects your coordination, reflexes, and judgment. If you have been drinking, you’re more likely to mishandle machinery or vehicles, to slip and fall, to make poor decisions, or simply to perform below your normal level. That creates problems for you, for your co-workers, and others affected by your actions.

General Hazards

There’s no question that alcohol affects the human body. It gets into your blood-stream quickly and moves through the body from there. While a single drink may not be a problem in most instances, it can reduce the ability to drive or use other equipment safely. And the more you drink, the greater the risks to your health and the safety of those around you. A person who has been drinking alcohol generally doesn’t have the physical and mental sharpness required to drive a car or operate machinery safely.

Heavy regular alcohol consumption can be very hazardous to your physical and mental health, your relationships, and your ability to function effectively. That may sound dramatic—if you haven’t been exposed to the havoc that excessive drinkers create for themselves, the people who care about them, and the people affected by their actions.

Heavy drinking can, over time, cause such physical problems as:

- High blood pressure
- Blackouts
- Poor sleep
- Liver disease, including cirrhosis
- Stomach irritation and sometimes bleeding or ulcers
- Birth defects in the children of pregnant women who drink

Immediate Impact

The immediate effects of drinking too much alcohol aren't too pleasant, either. Dizziness, headaches, vomiting, blurred vision, and unsteady balance are common reactions. In addition, people who drink to excess often get sick and run down. They drink rather than eat, and their health usually suffers.

Alcohol creates other problems, too. As a depressant, it slows down your physical reflexes and fogs your thinking. On the job, that's a serious hazard. I don't think you want to ride a bus whose driver has been drinking—or to fly with a pilot who's under the influence. I wouldn't want to be in the path of someone who's operating a forklift or crane while under the influence of alcohol. For that matter, I wouldn't want to work around heat, tools, electricity, chemicals, or anything potentially dangerous with someone who's been drinking. And I wouldn't want to trust my safety, or even my paperwork, to a person whose judgment and thinking are clouded by alcohol.

How great a hazard is this? One study found that more than 60% of adults know people who have gone to work under the influence of alcohol or drugs. In another study, more than 14 percent of employed Americans reported having five or more drinks on five or more days in the past 30 days. That level of drinking was claimed by more than 10 percent of people in such job categories as construction, machine operators and inspectors, and transportation and material movers.

Another study determined that lost productivity due to premature death and illness resulting from the use of alcohol and other drugs cost American businesses over \$80 billion. Of that total, 86% was the result of drinking.

People who drink to excess also tend to have greater absenteeism, more accidents, and lower productivity. In other words, there's nothing good to say about the effects of drinking on work performance.



Regulations

Regulations

Because driving while intoxicated is a major cause of deaths on the road, the federal government included alcohol in its Omnibus Transportation Employee Testing Act of 1991. That law directs the Department of Transportation to require alcohol and drug testing for employees in safety-sensitive jobs in the aviation, highway, rail, and mass transit industries. Such employees include pilots, bus drivers, holders of commercial drivers' licenses, and drivers of trucks that weigh 26,000 pounds or more or carry dangerous materials. While the law doesn't require pre-employment alcohol tests, employers must conduct alcohol tests on involved employees:

- After an accident in which alcohol may have been a factor
- When an employee's supervisor suspects misuse of alcohol
- When an employee returns to work after completing rehabilitation and at least six times in the first year thereafter.

Employers covered by this regulation must also conduct random testing. While alcohol testing is rare among other employers, that doesn't mean employers tolerate drinking on the job. Drinking and working don't mix.

Recovering alcoholics are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In other words, you can't be denied job opportunities because you are, or have been, in alcohol treatment. But ADA doesn't protect you if you're drinking on the job, act unsafely, or otherwise violate legal or organizational rules—especially if you put people at risk.

Need help? You may want to use benefits within your company.

You can contact www.aa.org



Identifying Hazards

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It can be difficult to identify when an individual's drinking becomes hazardous. Many people drink occasionally, and it's rare for someone to show up visibly drunk on the job. In addition, people vary in how much alcohol they can handle. Some can't handle any alcohol at all. Some can't stop at a single drink.

While problem drinking is often difficult to identify, there are signs that can point in that direction. These signs could have other causes, too. But if you recognize yourself or a co-worker in the list that follows, you should stop to consider whether alcohol is involved. The signals include:

- Drinking in the morning before work
- Drinking alone
- Drinking to avoid or solve problems
- Using alcohol as a medicine or as a way to relax
- Becoming loud, angry, aggressive, or violent after drinking
- Avoiding family or friends while drinking
- Losing time from work due to drinking
- Drinking to feel confident
- Feeling remorseful after drinking
- Forgetting what happened while drinking

Protection Against Hazards

The hazards of alcohol abuse are too serious to ignore. There's a real chance that someone may be badly hurt.

Some people with alcohol problems recognize the direction they're traveling and start the process of change themselves. Some respond to the concerns of their doctors, their spouses, or their friends. Some, however, need stronger medicine before they'll face up to—and do something about—their problem.

This workplace has a zero tolerance policy when it comes to alcohol on the job. You can expect serious consequences if you cause an accident or other problem because you were under the influence of alcohol.

We also believe that alcohol abuse is a treatable problem. A person who successfully deals with it deserves our respect. If you believe you may have a problem with alcohol, we encourage you to seek help. (Note: If your organization has an employee assistance program (EAP), explain how to access its confidential services.) There are many fine local programs available. Some, like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) are cost-free, and they've helped many people.

Safety Procedures

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It's not easy to admit an alcohol problem, and it's not our job to make anyone do so. That is, it's not our job unless the problem affects your work. If I identify a performance problem or hazardous behavior, I have a responsibility to say something. It's dangerous and unfair to expose others to safety hazards, and it's unfair to allow one employee's performance failures to become a burden on others.

If any of you are concerned about a co-worker's possible alcohol problem, you have a responsibility to do something, too. You may want to speak privately with the person. If you do, don't make accusations. Explain what concerns you. It may be as obvious as having alcohol on the breath. Or it could be a pattern of near-misses, a decline in work quality, or an apparent deterioration in health or appearance. Urge the person to get help with whatever is causing the problem. If you feel comfortable offering support, do so.

If you don't feel you can talk with your co-worker about it, or if previous talks have had no result, you owe it to all of us to talk with me. Again, simply raise your concerns. We'll keep it confidential and try to help the person connect with the right sources of help.

Help is the key word here. We'll support any individual who makes a sincere effort to face up to and try to overcome problems. But we won't tolerate safety risks. If a person holds a job defined as safety-sensitive, random testing for alcohol may be required.

Safety comes first no matter what the job. If it appears that someone can't safely perform his or her job, we're not going to take any chances. Whether the cause of the problem is alcohol or something else, the result is that an employee will be removed from any task or job where he or she is considered a danger.

Wrap Up

Wrap-up

A glass of beer or wine, a martini, or a margarita, may be your drink of choice in a social situation. That's fine. But never forget that even one drink affects how you function. Whether you recognize it or not, your physical and mental abilities get just a bit slower and a bit fuzzier.

The more you drink, the greater the physical and mental effects. That's true if you get drunk on an occasional Saturday night. It's even more true if heavy drinking becomes a habit, even if you try to ignore, disguise, or downplay that habit. You can't hide a drinking problem forever. No matter how tricky you think you are, you give yourself away repeatedly.

Depending on alcohol to feel better or avoid problems or be more outgoing is a big mistake. It doesn't really address the issues that are causing you to drink. And it could ruin your health, relationships, and possibly future in this organization. We're willing to help those who want to help themselves. But we won't permit any employee's alcohol abuses or problems to threaten our safety or performance.

