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Introduction

In Canada, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge that has changed the way that we live and work.

One of the indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada is a possible increase in the use of substances (e.g. the use of prescription drugs, alcohol, cannabis, illegal drugs) to cope with the stress of the pandemic.

This document provides employers and employees with an introduction to workplace impairment, with a focus on substance use during the pandemic. General recommendations are outlined for implementing a workplace impairment program.

For general COVID-19 prevention practices, employers and employees can refer to the CCOHS [COVID-19 Resources](#) documents, including "[Protect Yourself and Others](#)".

For additional information on workplace impairment please refer to the CCOHS Resource "[Impairment at Work](#)".

Impairment in the Workplace

Impairment refers to "a temporary physical, psychological, or physiological state of the worker that has a negative impact on performance or creates a hazard in the workplace." (as defined in CSA Standard Z1008:21, Management of Impairment in the Workplace).

Impairment is a longstanding occupational health and safety hazard. In a workplace, someone who is impaired may have difficulty completing tasks in a safe manner and may put themselves, their coworkers, and the public in danger.

There may be many organizational and personal factors that lead to impairment. Some of these factors include fatigue, a temporary disability, injury, working in extreme temperatures, exposure to a toxic substance (e.g., carbon monoxide), a stressful or traumatic event (e.g., grief) and substance use, including legal and illicit substances.

This document will focus on workplace impairment caused by substance use (e.g. the use of prescription drugs, alcohol, cannabis, illegal drugs).

Substance Use During the Pandemic

For some Canadians, the indirect effects of COVID-19 include increased consumption of substances such as alcohol, cannabis, and opioids.

Research from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction has found an increase in substance use among some Canadians. A [survey](#) conducted between March 30 and April 2, 2020 found 1 in 4 Canadians, aged 35 to 54 years, reported increased alcohol consumption during the pandemic. A second [survey](#) conducted between May 26-28, 2020 found that 20% of respondents (who were staying at home more and who drink alcohol) were drinking more often than they did before the pandemic started. The reasons provided for increased alcohol use was a lack of a regular schedule, boredom, and stress.

Impairment and the COVID-19 Pandemic

A third [survey](#) conducted between October and December 2020, found that approximately one third of Canadians who drink alcohol reported drinking more since the start of the pandemic, with 1 in 5 reporting problematic use. For cannabis consumers, two in five respondents reported increased consumption and problematic use.

Respondents' top stressors were their financial situation, social isolation, and the health of family members. The survey also found a relationship between mental health and substance use, with respondents with past and current mental health concerns reporting greater increases in substance use.

In addition to increased alcohol and cannabis use among some Canadians, there has been an increase in overdose deaths and non-fatal harms related to opioids since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a 120% increase in apparent opioid toxicity deaths was [reported](#) between July and September 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

Similar to the findings regarding alcohol use, the use of opioids may be related in part, as a way to cope with increased isolation, stress, and anxiety. For additional information please refer to the Government of Canada's document "[Opioid and Stimulant-Related Harms in Canada \(March 2021\)](#)".

Considerations for Employers

Employers need to take every precaution reasonable to protect the health and safety of their employees. This includes protecting them from hazards related to impairment. For example, if an employer or supervisor becomes aware that an employee who operates a forklift truck appears to be impaired, regardless of the cause of the impairment, the employer or supervisor must take reasonable precautions to ensure that the employee and all others are safe.

It is not the role of the supervisor or employer to diagnose a medical issue, or possible substance use or dependency problem. Their role is to identify if an employee appears to be impaired, and to take the appropriate actions to keep the workplace safe. Only a medical professional can diagnose a person with a substance use disorder or other issues.

It is important that issues of impairment are properly managed in the workplace (both during and after the pandemic). Employers should consider implementing a workplace management of impairment program and provide support to employees.

Workplace Management of Impairment Program

The employer's written workplace management of impairment program should contain the following components:

- Statement of the purpose and objectives of the policy and program
- A commitment to provide a safe and healthy workplace
- A commitment towards fostering an inclusive, supportive work environment by treating all workers with respect, helping workers seek assistance, and encouraging de-stigmatization.
- Responsibilities for the program
- Definition of impairment
- Statement of who is covered by the policy and program
- Statement of the employee's rights to confidentiality
- A mechanism for employees to confidentially report when they have been prescribed a medication that may cause impairment or when they feel they might be otherwise impaired
- Statement regarding if either medical/therapeutic or non-medical substances are allowed on the premises, or under what situation they would be allowed
- That arrangements have been made for employee education (e.g., general awareness)
- That arrangements have been made for educating and training employees, supervisors, and others in identifying impaired behaviour and what steps will be taken if impairment is suspected
- Expectations of contractors is outlined and communicated
- Provisions for assisting those with disability due to substance dependence, or those who request assistance
- Processes for accommodation, and return to work/remain at work
- If applicable, statement of under what circumstances substance testing will be conducted, as well as the criteria for testing and interpretation of test results

Impairment and the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Provision for a hierarchy of disciplinary actions

Organizations should also seek legal advice in areas where they don't have expertise.

Support for Employees

Employers should:

- Communicate the support and assistance available for individuals to help with impairment issues (e.g., employee assistance program - EAP).
- Promote resources available to help employees cope with mental health and substance use concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, share a link to the Government of Canada's [Wellness Together Canada](#) website which is intended to connect Canadians with mental health and substance use resources during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Offer support to any employee that requests assistance. Managers should be prepared to take steps to ensure that the worker can perform their job safely, provide information about supports available (e.g., EAP), and ensure that employees' requests for assistance are handled in a private and confidential manner.
- Promote wellness and healthy coping techniques (e.g., talking to a friend, meditation, exercise, doing an enjoyable activity such as hiking or gardening).
- Avoid promoting a drinking culture. Consider the implications for wellbeing and inclusion when planning work events (after the pandemic).

If you or someone you know is in crisis, please contact your local hospital, call 911 immediately, or contact a [Crisis Centre in your area](#).



It is important that mental health resources and support are provided to all workers, including access to an employee assistance program, if available.

For further information on COVID-19, refer to the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#).

Note that this guidance is just some of the adjustments organizations can make during a pandemic. Adapt this list by adding your own good practices and policies to meet your organization's specific needs.

For further information on respiratory infectious diseases, including COVID-19, refer to the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#).

Disclaimer: As public and occupational health and safety information may continue to change, local public health authorities should be consulted for specific, regional guidance. This information is not intended to replace medical advice or legislated health and safety obligations. Although every effort is made to ensure the accuracy, currency, and completeness of the information, CCOHS does not guarantee, warrant, represent or undertake that the information provided is correct, accurate or current. CCOHS is not liable for any loss, claim, or demand arising directly or indirectly from any use or reliance upon the information.