

**Move in a healthy direction**

Alcohol, and Substance Misuse: An Employer's Guide

 

Alcohol and Substance Misuse: An Employer's Guide

### **Introduction**

### As we all know, employers have a duty of care under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees. However the effects of alcohol and substance misuse go beyond health and safety. It can impair performance at work through poor decision making and impaired reaction times causing lost productivity, inferior goods or services, errors and accidents. Alcohol and drug use have also been seen to increase the risk of absenteeism, presenteeism, low productivity and inappropriate behaviour.

### **Why should employers worry about Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco?**

Alcohol is thought to be a contributing factor in 20% of workplace accidents. Alcohol misuse costs the UK economy between 1.3-2.7% of GDP. Whilst the number of drug and alcohol dependent people in the workplace is low, some surveys estimate that 3 in 10 workers have tried drugs in the past year and 30% have reported their productivity at work has been impacted by alcohol consumption from the night before. Over 10 million people in the UK are drinking at levels above the Chief Medical Officer’s lower risk guidelines.

It is also estimated that there are 1.5 million adults in the UK addicted to prescription or over the counter medications including sleeping pills, weight loss, antidepressants and anti-anxiety medication. Many of these medications can have an impact on an individual’s ability to drive or operate machinery safely.

Small and Medium sized businesses (those with less than 250 staff) are disproportionately affected by the loss of key staff for any period, including loss caused by alcohol and drug use or by the long term impact of smoking. If businesses can support their staff to be healthier, their business will benefit in the long term. This guide relates to alcohol and drug use. For advice on smoking and tobacco, please refer to our Smoking Tobacco: An Employer’s Guide.

### **Alcohol and Drug use and its wider effects on health**

It’s common for people living with mental health concerns to increase their consumption of alcohol, or smoke more. Evidence suggests that about half of people who are dependent on drugs also have a mental health condition. The relationship between poor mental health and the use of drugs, alcohol or tobacco is complex. The two issues can effect each other or co-exist independently. It is important to consider mental health when planning to address alcohol, drugs and smoking in the workplace. You can refer to our Guide; A mentally healthy workplace: An Employers’ Guide for further information.

### **Alcohol, Drugs and Workplace Health and Safety**

As mentioned at the start of this guide, employers have a duty of care under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees. Other legislation to be aware of includes Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 which places a duty of care on the employer to assess risks to the health and safety of employees. In addition employers should be aware of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which makes it an offence for someone to knowingly permit the production, supply of use of controlled drugs on their premises, unless there are specific circumstances (such as medication supplied by a doctor).

In addition the following law applies to some workplaces, the Road Traffic Act 1988 - states that any person who, when driving or attempting to drive a motor vehicle on a road or other public place, is unfit to drive through drink or drugs shall be guilty of an offence and the Transport and Works Act 1992 - makes it a criminal offence for certain workers to be unfit through drugs and/or alcohol consumption.

A clear alcohol and drugs policy will assist in ensuring relevant health and safety laws are adhered to and that any problems are dealt with effectively and in a consistent manner. The policy should support staff to seek help in these areas should they need it.

Please visit the [Health and Safety Executive website](https://www.hse.gov.uk/alcoholdrugs/) for more information on Alcohol, Drugs and Health and Safety law. If you need a template policy please contact us or visit [ACAS.](https://archive.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1986)

**Alcohol Units and Lower Risk Guidelines**

Over 10 million people in England are drinking alcohol above the Chief Medical Officer’s lower risk guidelines. To keep health risks from alcohol low it is recommended not to drink more than 14 units of alcohol a week on a regular basis. You should also aim to have two alocohol free days each week.

A unit of alcohol is 10ml of pure alcohol by volume. This might seem complicated to work out for a measure of drink, that is for example 20% alcohol by volume. One unit of alcohol is equivalent to 1 small glass of wine, a single measure of spirits or half a pint of beer, lager or cider which is 3.5%ABV. To calculate the units in a drink, use the following formula:

Strength (ABV%) x Volume (ml) ÷ 1000 units.

For example, a pint of beer, which is 4.9% would be 4.9 x 568 ÷ 1000 = 2.8 units

**What employers can do to help**

There are several things that employers can do to support their staff. Here are some suggestions based on latest Health and Wellbeing research and best practice. This guide has focused particularly on alcohol and substance misuse, although many of these initiatives will support and promote better health and wellbeing in general.

* Open communication with staff will encourage them to come forward and report concerns regarding their own health and wellbeing, as well as health and safety within the organisation. Consult with staff when changes are being made in the workplace, and if you have a workplace union involve them in discussions too.
* Ensure senior management are on board with health and wellbeing initiatives. Having senior managers speak out about their own experience can encourage staff to speak up.
* Use a staff noticeboard, either in a staff room or on the company drives to promote good health messages and signpost staff to sources of support.
* Carry out return to work interviews to ensure staff are supported when returning to the workplace after absence and if onward referrals are needed for treatment or support services these can be made at the earliest opportunity.
* Promote and participate in alcohol free and sensible drinking campaigns such as Dry January and Alcohol Awareness Week.
* Promote [NHS One You apps](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/apps/) to encourage sensible drinking and healthy lifestyles.
* Train managers in how to spot the signs of potential drug or alcohol misuse. This will boost their confidence in signposting staff to sources of support.
* Ensure your drugs and alcohol policy is up to date and includes sources of support available to staff. Make sure the rules for drinking at work (including any business functions) are clear and consistent.
* Avoid promoting drinking at work socials and make non-alcoholic options available.
* Ensure your absence management policy allows time for staff to attend appointments if their require treatment for alcohol or drug misuse, or counselling as you would with other medical appointments.
* Consider whether or not you need to carry out alcohol or drugs testing. Testing should always be carried out by a trained professional, and reasons for the testing be explained fully to staff.
* Promoting sources of mental health support can encourage staff to seek help rather than turn to alcohol or drugs as a self coping mechanism.
* Work to prevent bullying and discrimination in the workplace.
* Train staff to use equipment properly and that regular updates are provided.

### **Useful Resources**

* [A Better Medway](http://www.abettermedway.co.uk) - local health improvement advice and support
* [One You Kent:](https://www.kent.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health/one-you-kent) local health improvement advice and information for Kent
* [Kent Community Health Foundation Trust:](https://www.kentcht.nhs.uk/service/one-you-kent/) health improvement services for Kent
* Business in the Community Public Health England Toolkits: [Mental Health toolkit for employers](http://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/all-resources/toolkits/)
* [Every Mind Matters](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/) Mental Health information from the NHS and Public Health England
* [For Better Mental Health at Work](https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/)
* [Health and Safety Executive](http://www.hse.gov.uk)
* [ACAS](https://www.acas.org.uk/)
* [Alcohol Change (Dry January)](https://alcoholchange.org.uhttps:/alcoholchange.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/dry-januaryk/get-involved/campaigns/dry-january)
* [Alcohol Awareness Week](https://alcoholchange.org.uhttps:/alcoholchange.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/alcohol-awareness-week-1k/get-involved/campaigns/alcohol-awareness-week-1)
* [NHS One You: Drink Less](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/for-your-body/drink-less/)
* [Talk to Frank: Drug advice](https://www.talktofrank.com/)
* [Medway Active Recovery Service](http://wellbeing.turning-point.co.uk/medway/) (Turning Point): For help in dealing with problem drinking, alcohol dependency and drug misuse (adults).
* [Medway Young People’s Wellness Centre](https://www.openroad.org.uk/Pages/Category/medway-wellness-centre) (Open Road): support for problem drinking and drug abuse for young people (aged
* [Drug and Alcohol Support](https://www.kent.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health/one-you-kent/drink-less/alcohol-and-drug-support) in Kent for adults and young people.
* Mental Health First Aid – [Line Manager’s Resource](https://mhfaengland.org/line-managers-resource/)
* Mind: [https://www.mind.org.uk/](http://www.mind.org.uk/)
* NHS for information on various conditions and healthy lifestyles: [https://www.nhs.uk/](http://www.nhs.uk/)
* NHS One You for healthy lifestyle advice: [https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/](http://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/)

The following sources of information were consulted in the production of this guide:

Business in the Community Public Health England Toolkits: <https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/drugs-alcohol-and-tobacco-a-toolkit-for-employers/>

HSE

ACAS

Drink Aware

**Contact**

For a no obligation meeting to get the Workplace Health programme started in your business, or for further information please contact:

By email workplacehealth@medway.gov.uk. By telephone 01634 334307 or visit the [website.](http://www.medway.gov.uk/healthyworkplace)