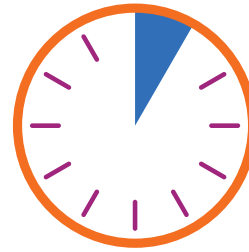




# What Impairment Looks Like



## 5 Minute Safety Talk

### **At some point, most of us have felt the effects of impairment: from losing focus and reaction time to just feeling *different*.**

Often, this impairment is the result of using substances such as alcohol, prescription drugs or marijuana, though we can also become impaired due to fatigue or other factors, such as personal stress. Whatever the cause, this gap between our normal state of mind and how we feel in the moment can put us at risk, especially on the job.

In order to stay safe, workers need to be sober, well rested and attentive. Losing sleep or using these substances can greatly impede a worker's ability to focus, operate machinery and make sound decisions. Regardless of industry, losing focus on the job can have deadly consequences for individuals and their coworkers. Though many of these substances and behaviors are common, their risks are not always as well-known, leading to many injuries and deaths each year.

#### **Alcohol**

- **Impairment begins with the first drink. Though the legal alcohol concentration limit is 0.08 or lower in all states, research shows that for the majority of drivers, driving performance has deteriorated significantly at this level. Even if you don't drive for work, alcohol can impair your ability to work safely.**

#### **Prescription drugs**

- **Some legally prescribed drugs, including opioids and other over-the-counter medicines, can result in impairment – even when taken precisely as prescribed. These drugs can cause drowsiness, alter your visual functions, and even affect your mental judgement and motor skills. Many people don't realize that when a drug says to avoid operating heavy machinery while using it, that includes driving, meaning that people who commute to work are at risk as well.**

#### **Marijuana**

- **Though it is increasingly being decriminalized and legalized for medical and recreational use in states, it is important to remember that marijuana, as well as other cannabis products such as edibles, cause impairment, with effects potentially lasting for several hours. Similar to alcohol, marijuana can cause impairment at any level of use and effects like dizziness, drowsiness, and altered time and space perception can pose significant safety risks.**

#### **Fatigue**

- **Though many of us view sleep loss as a normal part of our day, fatigue can slow your reaction time, decrease your awareness of hazards and worsen your ability to sustain attention: all serious risks in the workplace. You are three times more likely to be in a car crash if you are fatigued, for example, and losing just two hours of sleep can have the same effect as drinking three beers.**

### **Recognize your risks**

Though many of these effects may seem obvious, we are not always the best judges of our own levels of impairment. We know the risks of drunk driving, yet each year thousands of people are killed in drunk-driving crashes. According to an NSC survey, 70 percent of employers have been impacted by prescription drug misuse<sup>1</sup>. A 2018 study in Colorado showed that 69% of people who use marijuana admitted to driving after using<sup>2</sup>. If we can recognize the signs of impairment in ourselves and in others, we can make the safe choice and avoid injury or death on the job.

While we may experience impairment in different ways, the takeaway is universal: if you feel unable to safely perform your tasks due to impairment, you shouldn't be performing them. If you feel different, you function different!

### **Enact solutions**

When you feel the effects of impairment on the job, you must be willing to acknowledge the situation and respond accordingly. If a short break would help, for instance, ask your supervisor about swapping with someone so you can rest. If you drive alone for work, plan to take regular breaks so you can regain your energy before you become fatigued.

This type of thinking is particularly important in safety-sensitive roles, where your decisions can directly affect the health and safety of your coworkers. Trust your instincts and if you feel impaired, consider these steps:

- **Safely stop what you are doing**
- **Assess your reactions and cognitive functions to determine whether you can proceed**
- **Ask for assistance, if needed**

Everyone's responsibilities are different and may involve unique risks, but we all need to be willing to step up and make the safe choice in the moment.

### **Take it home**

We have to make safe decisions both on the job and back home. Talk to your loved ones about the different forms of impairment so they understand and can recognize these risks. A night out with friends, for example, should always include a plan for getting home safe. When you set this example yourself, you can help protect your loved ones and ensure they make the safe choice every time.

### **References**

<sup>1</sup>According to a 2017 NSC Survey

<sup>2</sup>According to Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (September 2018), *The Legalization of Marijuana in Colorado: The Impact Volume 5*. <https://rmhridta.org/files/D2DF/FINAL-%20Volume%205%20UPDATE%202018.pdf>



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