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HSE Safety Cornerstones Newsletter

A newsletter of practical compliance and safety tips provided by
Crendon Insurance Brokers Ltd

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Drug and Alcohol Use a Growing Problem in UK Workplaces

Drug and alcohol use is a growing problem in UK workplaces, according to a recent report by the British Medical Association (BMA). Despite the inability to accurately quantify the scale of substance use in working populations due to insufficient data, the BMA can still discern a trend of increased alcohol and drug use among those who work. Alcohol and illicit drug use is thus a major issue for workplaces and a growing concern for employers.

The figures are sobering—in 2011, there were 8,748 alcohol-related deaths reported and 1,785 related to illicit drug use. The actual figures are likely higher, since alcohol and drug use indirectly contribute to more deaths besides those reported. The BMA report shows that individuals in employment are more likely to drink frequently compared to the unemployed. And although rates of illicit drug use among workers may be lower than the rates for unemployed drug users, the gap between the two groups continues to narrow.

These alarming trends spell bad news for UK employers—illicit drink and drug use cause a whole host of problems in the workplace, including absenteeism, low productivity, inappropriate behaviour, poor decision-making, impaired reaction times, errors and accidents.

How can employers reverse this growing trend?

Since you are legally obligated under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, your employees' health, safety and welfare at work, make their health and safety your first priority. Use the following advice as a foundation for building an effective workplace culture that eschews illicit drug and excessive alcohol use:

- Implement an alcohol and drug (substance use) policy.
- Train managers and supervisors to recognise the signs of drink and drug abuse. They should be prepared to approach an employee they suspect has a problem or to counsel an employee who approaches them with a problem.
- Classify drink and drug problems as health problems and deal with them accordingly—with strict confidentiality.
- Aim to help employees with a problem rather than simply dismissing them.
- Treat absence due to alcohol or illicit drug use the same as any other cause under your workplace absence policy.

If the drink and drug problem with your employees is excessive, consider instituting workplace screening and testing. But be careful—compliant workplace testing can be tricky. You must appropriately safeguard samples, ensure that competent practitioners interpret the results, and comply with medical best practices and data protection requirements.

Refer to competent legal advice to ensure you follow all drug and alcohol screening regulations.



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Rampant Health and Safety Myths Drain Time, Waste Resources

A new HSE survey uncovered the bizarre measures some small organisations have taken when trying to comply with health and safety laws. For example, one business completed a risk assessment detailing the correct procedure for using a tape measure; another provided written guidance for the best way to walk up stairs.

In response to these silly, unnecessary and wasteful measures adopted in the name of health and safety, the HSE is urging small- and medium-sized employers to use its free online tools and guidance which are specifically designed to take the guesswork out of risk management.

The HSE survey illuminated the consequences of health and safety law confusion—workplaces end up draining significant amounts of time and wasting valuable resources. For example, 11 per cent of respondents to the HSE's survey believe that a qualified electrician must test very basic electrical appliances, such as kettles and toasters, every year. But this is not a requirement, and testing basic appliances uses time and money that could be better spent on things like inspecting electrical systems for faulty wiring.

Health and safety law is not meant to place unnecessary obstacles on the path to compliant workplaces—the HSE wants every workplace to understand and follow the applicable health and safety guidelines. Ignorance and miseducation are two substantial obstacles standing between workplaces and compliance. Nearly one-third of all surveyed small businesses said that when it comes to health and safety, they know they have to take some action, but are unsure where to start or whether what they have done so far is correct. Clearly the HSE's guidance is needed.

To clarify the issue, the HSE's small business lead Kate Haire said, 'Health and safety is all about taking reasonable steps to manage serious risks of ill health and injury in the workplace. If something sounds completely unreasonable, more often than not it will be totally unnecessary too.'

Rely on Crendon Insurance Brokers Ltd to help you cut through the bogus health and safety myths bogging down your organisation and guide you through to compliance.



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Recent HSE News and Prosecutions

Fish and Chips Choking Death Results in Fine

A care home provider was fined £170,000 after a vulnerable resident choked to death on her fish and chips at the provider's Chorley premises. The resident should only have been provided with pureed food, as she had swallowing difficulties which carried a risk of choking. Because she suffered from dementia and a neuron disease, the resident was not able to refuse the meal or recognise the danger in eating it. Members of staff were not told to monitor the resident's eating habits, even though a specialist assessment had been carried out at the local hospital and sent to the care home provider.

Printing Firm's Safety Failures Cause Finger Amputation

A national printing firm was fined £10,000 and ordered to pay £2,997 in costs after safety failings at its Leeds plant led to a worker's partial finger amputation. The 55-year-old employee was hurt while attempting to remove a blockage from a magazine insert feeder machine. While he was still removing the debris, the machine unexpectedly started up again, slicing off part of his first finger. The HSE's investigation revealed that the machine was not isolated from its power source and the firm's insufficient safety measures did not prevent access to dangerous moving parts. The employee has since returned to work.

School Prohibits Hot Drinks on Trips

A girl was barred from bringing hot drinks on future school trips after her school told her father it has a no-hot-drink policy 'due to health and safety'. The HSE Myth Busters Panel decided the school's decision was yet another example of organisations conflating non-existent health and safety law with their own unnecessary policies.

Plasters Banned From First-aid Kit

After a supermarket employee in Lisburn cut her finger at work, a co-worker tried to find a plaster for her in the workplace first-aid kit, but there were none. When attempting to refill the plasters, the employees were told by their manager that, due to health and safety reasons like allergies, plasters were no longer allowed in the first-aid kit. The HSE panel ruled that it would be absurd to prohibit plasters from first-aid kits. To avoid an allergic reaction, simply ask the person if he or she is allergic before applying a plaster.

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