

**IT'S OUR BUSINESS**

# What you need to know about fitness for work

- **ALCOHOL**
  - **DRUGS and**
  - **GAMBLING**
- in the Workplace**



**Alberta Health  
Services**

**Substance use and gambling can dramatically affect fitness for work—an employee’s ability to do the job safely and well.**

Substance use and gambling can dramatically affect fitness for work—an employee’s ability to do the job safely and well. There are both direct and indirect costs to the workplace, including effects on individual employees.

There is so much that individual employees can do to contribute to fitness for work and ensure a safe and productive workplace.

This starts with knowing some things about your own gambling and use of alcohol or other drugs. It also includes identifying when a co-worker is not fit for work and knowing what to do about it.

None of us wants to work with someone who is intoxicated or performing his or her work in a way that puts us in danger. We often suffer in silence because we don’t know what to do.

Read on to learn more about fitness for work and

- how gambling and use of alcohol and other drugs affect fitness for work
- what you can do to be fit for work
- what to do when others are not fit for work

## **How gambling and use of alcohol and other drugs affect fitness for work**

Fitness for work refers to the need for all employees to show up fit to perform their work. It also refers to the need for workers to remain in a fit condition while they are performing their duties throughout the workday.

Most people are surprised at some of the ways in which gambling and the use of alcohol or other drugs can affect fitness for work. For instance, you probably would not intentionally show up for work drunk or under the influence of drugs, but you may unintentionally misuse a medication. Unintentional misuse is one of the drug problems facing the workplace today.

Gambling, preoccupation with personal problems, and personal health issues can also make someone less fit for work. The effects can be similar to those of using alcohol or other drugs.

These are examples of situations that may make you unfit for work.

1. You show up at work feeling groggy and unco-ordinated as a result of taking a medication, perhaps a painkiller, allergy pill or cold remedy (many prescription and over-the-counter drugs have the ability to affect safe work performance).
2. You are taking your spouse's Tylenol® for your headache and you don't know that it contains codeine, a powerful opiate that can seriously affect your ability to work safely. It's not only unwise but also illegal to take medication prescribed for someone else.
3. You are emotionally upset or preoccupied with personal problems. For example, you are distracted from your work by money problems, worries about mounting debt, calls from creditors or disagreements with your family because of your gambling.
4. You left the party or bar at 2:00 a.m. and you showed up for work at 7:00. It takes a healthy, adult body approximately one to two hours to metabolize (clean out) the effects of one standard drink. A standard drink is one bottle of beer, an ounce and a half of hard liquor or five ounces of wine.

The length of time it takes to get rid of alcohol in your system also depends upon these factors:

- your overall health
- how much you weigh
- how much you've been drinking
- whether or not you have eaten
- how well your liver functions—heavy drinkers may experience liver damage that slows down the metabolic process
- what other substances you are using, including prescription and over-the-counter medications

Bottom line? If you've been drinking heavily the night before, you may still be intoxicated when you show up for work the next day. More importantly, you are likely not fit for work and your safety, and that of your co-workers, is at risk.

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### **What you can do to be fit for work**

In order to be fit for work, you must take personal responsibility for your actions and choices where alcohol, drugs and gambling are concerned. Do your best to be well rested before reporting for work and take an active role in managing your personal health. Work safely and wear the required gear.

Use the following checklist to gauge your own fitness for work:

- \_\_\_ I do not drink alcohol or use drugs while I am at work.
- \_\_\_ I do not show up for work still feeling the effects of the alcohol or drugs I consumed prior to reporting for duty (the night before, for example).
- \_\_\_ I tell my doctor or pharmacist about the specific type of work I do and ask them whether the prescribed or over-the-counter medication I have been given will affect the safe performance of my duties.
- \_\_\_ When my medication has the potential to affect safety, I ask about alternative medications or request modified work.
- \_\_\_ I take steps to get adequate rest when working shifts.
- \_\_\_ I am receiving treatment for illnesses, such as diabetes or epilepsy, that can affect safe work performance.
- \_\_\_ I have talked to my team about my medical condition and they know what to do in an emergency or if I experience symptoms of my illness.

- I am not emotionally upset or preoccupied with personal problems.
- I know how to work safely and am wearing the required safety gear.

### **When others are not fit for work**

It can be tough to know just what to do when someone on your team does not appear to be fit for work. Here are some examples of situations that would indicate that a worker is not fit for work:

- A co-worker is experiencing, or just had, a seizure or other medical symptoms.
- A co-worker is very upset or emotional—for example, he or she has just received bad news.
- You notice a co-worker drinking or using drugs at work.
- You think that a co-worker has been drinking or using drugs. You can rely on behavioural indicators such as
  - the smell of alcohol
  - slurred speech
  - staggering or unsteady gait

Some of the above symptoms can also be indicators of diabetes or other medical problems. It is very important not to try to diagnose the reason why a co-worker is not fit for work. You also don't have to prove your suspicions. That's a job for the professionals—a doctor, occupational health nurse or other medical practitioner.

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Your job is simply to report your concerns to a supervisor. It's your supervisor's job to take it from there. Knowing how to describe your concerns can make this task so much easier. It can feel very uncomfortable or like "snitching" to tell your supervisor, "I think Joe is drunk," or "I think Sarah has been using drugs."

The best way to report your concerns to your supervisor is to focus on observable behaviours like the ones listed above. For example, you might say, "I am concerned about Joe. When I approached him, I noticed a strong smell of alcohol. When I talked with him, his speech was slurred. He also appeared very unsteady on his feet. I'm worried about his fitness for work."

Now it's up to the supervisor to take immediate action, including asking Joe to participate in a fitness for work assessment by a medical professional. If Joe is not fit for work, steps will be taken to remove him from the work site and ensure his safety and medical needs are addressed. If Joe is found to be fit for work, he will be returned to the job.

Either way, you've taken appropriate and responsible action to ensure Joe's safety and that of those he works with. You've made no claims about Joe being drunk or stoned. You have focused on the obvious behaviours and done the safe thing.



## What if there is no supervisor present?

There may be times when you work without a supervisor present. It's still important to ensure fitness for work. Because policies differ from one workplace to another, it's important to talk with your supervisor or organization about the steps to take. In almost all cases, these steps will include making sure that a worker does not work if there are concerns about his or her fitness for work.

## Enabling in the workplace

In Joe's case, if you had not taken any action, more than safety might be affected. If Joe does have an alcohol problem, you might be *enabling* him. Enabling refers to those behaviours that can actually help the problem to get worse. Here are some examples of enabling behaviours:

- ignoring the problem
- avoiding the problem
- covering up for those experiencing problems
- making excuses for another's behaviour
- giving someone a "break"

Enabling is usually done with good intentions. Often, the enablers think they are helping the employee with the problem by cutting them a little slack or covering up for them. But enabling almost always has bad results. For example, the longer you cover for an employee who has an alcohol, drug or gambling problem, the longer they will continue to use or gamble without intervention. The problem usually ends up getting worse, fitness for work is affected and everyone's safety is at risk.

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### **It's everyone's responsibility**

Fitness for work is the responsibility of everyone in the workplace. It starts at the top, with clear policies and guidelines, but it cannot be left to managers and supervisors. Each employee shares responsibility for ensuring their own fitness for work and that of their co-workers. Working together, you and your co-workers can make your workplace safer for everyone.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

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