

# ***SUBSTANCE USE & IMPAIRMENT***

## **IN THE WORKPLACE**

Impairment in the workplace can be a significant issue for worker safety. We all have a role to play in making sure both that everyone gets home safely, and that our colleagues who find themselves working while impaired are treated with respect and dignity.

Many things can impair a person's ability to do their job safely, such as:

- Illness – including common cold and flu
- Lack of sleep or physical exhaustion
- Medical conditions or pain
- Mental health
- Trouble in one's personal life
- Substance use – including alcohol, or its aftereffects
- Alienation or unreasonable stress or productivity expectations in the workplace
- Hunger or dehydration
- Environmental factors – including extreme heat or cold

**All workplace impairment can pose a potential risk to workplace safety.** Yet drugs, and those who use them, are often treated differently than other types of impairment. To ensure safe and respectful workplaces for all of us, we need to ensure that policies aimed at addressing workplace impairment are proportional, reasonable and evidence-based.

**LEARN MORE AT [DRUGPOLICY.CA](https://www.drugpolicy.ca)**

## Which of the symptoms below can be caused by fatigue vs. substance use?

- Decreased alertness and vigilance
- Slowed reaction time and an inability to react appropriately
- Poor memory and recall
- Slowed ability to make effective and/or quick decisions
- Impaired Information processing
- Ineffective communication

**Answer: Both.** All the above are possible symptoms of both fatigue and substance use.<sup>1</sup> In one study, researchers concluded that “moderate levels of fatigue produce performance impairment equivalent to or greater than those observed at levels of alcohol intoxication while driving.” Yet in the workplace, we treat people differently depending on the cause.

Singling out substance use in workplace impairment is unfair, disproportionate and ineffective. Employer-imposed monitoring such as biological testing is costly, can be highly stigmatizing, and has not been demonstrated to increase workplace safety.<sup>2</sup>

There are many reasons someone might use a substance on or off the job, ranging from recreation on one's personal time, to physically and mentally managing difficult or unreasonable workloads. Workplace impairment is a safety issue, no matter the cause. **To respect, support and keep all workers safe, let's ensure our drug policies are grounded in evidence, not stigma.**

---

<sup>1</sup> Note: not all substances may cause these symptoms, and with frequent or regular use for some people, some symptoms may not occur at all. Nestler, Eric J. “Molecular Basis of Long-Term Plasticity Underlying Addiction.” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, vol. 2, no. 2, Feb. 2001, pp. 119-128, <https://doi.org/10.1038/35053570>.

<sup>2</sup> Biological testing does not determine when a substance was taken, making it ineffective in addressing workplace impairment. *Test'em all: Drug Testing Law and Policy*. Johnathon Chapnick, April 2016. Labour Relations; The Continuing Education Society of British Columbia.