

Sobering Results: Recent Study Suggests Drug Use Is Up Among American Workers

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A recent study conducted by the drug testing company Quest Diagnostics indicates that the rate of positive drug test results among the U.S. workforce is at a 12-year high, driven by increased cocaine, amphetamines, and marijuana use. The study's results track an alarming trend that highlights the continued need for vigilance for signs of use and abuse in the workplace as well as comprehensive prevention, testing, and treatment programs.

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According to the [Quest Diagnostics Drug Testing Index™](#) released on May 17, 2017, overall positivity in urine drug testing among the combined U.S. workforce—both non-safety-sensitive and safety-sensitive workers—in 2016 increased by five percent since 2015, representing the highest annual positivity rate since 2004. The study, which has been conducted annually since 1988, analyzed the test results of more than 10 million workforce drug tests nationwide, but only included results from workers whose employers use Quest Diagnostics to perform their drug testing, so actual rates of positive results in employment-related testing on a national level may vary.

The study examined positivity rates for testing in the general U.S. workforce; the federally-mandated, safety-sensitive workforce; and the combined workforce. The safety-sensitive group includes pilots, bus and truck drivers, and workers in nuclear power plants for whom certain federal agencies mandate routine drug testing.

Increase in Positive Drug Tests for Cocaine

As reported in the study, the positivity rate in urine testing for cocaine continued an upward trend, increasing for the fourth consecutive year in the general workforce (up 12 percent from the rate in 2015) and for the second consecutive year in the federally-mandated, safety-sensitive workforce (up 7 percent from the rate in 2015). In both groups, the positivity rate for cocaine in post-accident testing was twice as much as the rate for pre-employment testing, suggesting (without conclusively demonstrating) that drug use might be contributing to those workplace accidents.

Dramatic Increase in Marijuana Positivity

The rise in cocaine positivity is dwarfed by the dramatic increase in marijuana positivity in the general workforce, which increased by nearly 75 percent between 2013 and 2016 in oral testing, which detects recent drug use, and 10 percent in the federally-mandated, safety-sensitive workforce. This jump follows a [wave of recent legislative efforts to legalize recreational use of marijuana](#) in several states and municipalities nationwide, starting with the passage of laws in Washington and Colorado. The results of the study in those states demonstrated more dramatic year-over-year increases in positive urine tests, with positivity rates in both states outpacing the national average for the first time since their statutes legalizing the recreational use of marijuana took effect.

Amphetamines Positivity Continues to Increase

Similarly, positivity rates for amphetamines (including both amphetamines and methamphetamines) in urine tests increased more than eight percent in both the general and safety-sensitive populations examined in the study. This increase continues the upward trend in amphetamine positivity of the last four years. Between 2012 and 2016, urine test positivity for amphetamines (including certain prescription drugs) grew by 64 percent in the general workforce and 14 percent among federally-mandated, safety-sensitive workforce.

Reduction in Positive Prescription Opiate and Heroin Tests

One encouraging result from the study was the decline for the fourth consecutive year in prescription opiate positivity rates. Perhaps as a result of state and federal efforts to more tightly control opiate prescribing in response to the national opioid addiction crisis, positivity rates for this class of drugs in urine tests has decreased among the general workforce by 28 percent since 2012. Prescription opioids include hydrocodone, hydromorphone, and oxycodones.

Another promising result is the positivity rates for heroin urine tests, which were unchanged from 2015 among the general U.S. workforce and declined among the federally-mandated, safety-sensitive workforce.

Key Takeaways

Drug use among the U.S. workforce continues to be a problem that impacts the workplace in a myriad of ways, including diminished productivity, absenteeism, and increased workplace accidents. The results of the recent Quest Diagnostics study serve as a reminder to reexamine your drug and alcohol policies and programs to include education, prevention, and treatment components and to revise your testing procedures.

TOPICS

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