Many Legal Drugs Put Workers in a Precarious Place



Safety Talk

A pilot crashes a plane. A truck driver dozes off and misses a curve. A machine operator accidentally sticks his hand into some rollers. What do all of these accident victims have in common? They were all affected by legal drugs, the kind you buy at your neighborhood drug store.

What's at Stake

An individual doesn't have to be staggering around drunk or having hallucinations to be dangerously impaired. Even the drowsiness or slowed reaction time caused by common medications can result in deadly accidents, both on the job and on the road.

Just because a drug is legal to use does not make it safe to use in the workplace. We're talking about prescription and over-the-counter drugs. We all know that illegal drugs such as marijuana or cocaine are hazardous to use. We also know that alcohol is prohibited at work because it is intoxicating. But did you know that many other drugs that we take for granted can also affect your ability to do your job safely?

Drugs such as cold remedies often carry a warning advising that you do not drive or operate machinery if you feel drowsy. Many of these mixtures contain antihistamines, which reduce some of the unpleasant effects of a cold, but can also make you sleepy. Cough syrups contain a variety of drugs which, if taken in enough quantity, can cause impairment of your judgment and reflexes. Painkillers work because they dull your senses—the same senses you need to stay alert while you are working. Tranquilizers can calm you down, but in the process they can make everything seem fuzzy.

What Can Go Wrong

A 56-year-old woman drove her vehicle into the rear of another vehicle while she was under the influence of a prescription medication. The driver who caused the accident had been traveling at about 45 miles-per-hour (70 kilometers per hour) when the impact occurred. Both occupants of the car that was hit were taken to the hospital for treatment of their injuries.

How to Protect Yourself

Here are some guidelines for safer use of prescription and over-the-counter medications:

- Do not take medicine unnecessarily.
- Talk to your doctor or druggist before mixing any medicines.
- Do not consume alcohol when taking medication, including non-prescription remedies.
- Read the labels and information sheets accompanying the medicine, and strictly follow the instructions. This includes heeding any precautions about mixing medications or avoiding activities such as driving or operating machinery.
- Discuss with your doctor the possibility of any side effects affecting your ability to perform safely while taking any medication. And be sure to let your supervisor know of any such restrictions.

A recent study showed that 15 percent of all deaths and injuries in traffic accidents in the United States and Canada involved driving while under the influence of legal medications. It doesn’t take much imagination to figure that people are also having many accidents at work while under the influence of these medications.

Here are some of the possible side effects of prescription and non-prescription drugs which potentially can lead to accidents causing injury or death:

- Drowsiness
- Dizziness
- Allergic reactions
- Depression
- Anxiety, irritability
- Inability to concentrate

Final Word

It is important to be aware of the possible dangers of using prescription drugs and over-the-counter remedies prior to or during work shifts. Be sure to follow all directions and precautions carefully. Talk to your supervisor if you have doubts about your ability to work safely when you are taking a medication.