



Workers in High-Risk Industries at Greater Risk for Opioid Deaths, Study Says

Insights

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Your employees could be at a heightened risk for developing an addiction to opioids after a workplace injury. Now is the time to take measures to minimize the risk of this happening to them.

It is well known that prescription use of opioids for specific medical problems can turn into addiction and dependency for some, and many of the prescriptions for opioids originate from workplace injuries. Now, a new study in Massachusetts has confirmed the connection, finding that workers in higher-risk industries are at greater risk for opioid deaths.

On August 8, 2018, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health issued a [report](#) that broke down opioid-related overdose deaths by industry and occupation from 2011 through 2015. While finding that the rate of fatal opioid overdoses vary considerably by occupation and industry, it found the “rate of fatal opioid-related overdose was higher among workers employed in industries and occupations known to have high rates of work-related injuries and illnesses.” Specifically, the report found the following rates of opioid-related deaths:

- Construction and extraction: 150.6 deaths per 100,000 workers
- Material moving occupations: 59.1 deaths per 100,000 workers
- Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations: 54.0 deaths per 100,000 workers
- Transportation occupations: 42.6 deaths per 100,000 workers
- Production occupations: 42.1 deaths per 100,000 workers

As the report notes, its finding is consistent with prior research connecting prescribing opioids for treatment of workplace injuries. Moreover, the report found that the rate of opioid deaths varied depending upon job security and availability of paid sick leave.

Given the report’s findings, employers in higher-risk industries should consider a number of [lessons](#) to lower the rate of workplace injuries, including:

- Creating an environment where employees are more likely to disclose opioid-related issues;
- Reconsidering zero tolerance drug testing failure policies;
- Considering enhanced monitoring of workers’ compensation claims; and

- Revisiting and enhancing drug counseling programs.

The opioid epidemic and its impact on employee behavior and health creates unique challenges for employers. Although no perfect response is available, now is the time to rethink your drug testing and counseling programs in order to keep your employees and workplace safe. A focus on education, prevention, and counseling may help minimize the impact of opioid use on the workplace.

Related People



David Klass
Partner
704.778.4163
[Email](#)



Travis W. Vance
Regional Managing Partner
704.778.4164
[Email](#)

Industry Focus

