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Opioid abuse costing U.S. employers billions

Finding ways to deter painkiller abuse has been a high priority for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in recent years. And with opioid abuse costing U.S. businesses close to \$26 billion a year, health plan sponsors should take note as well.

Lost work and productivity alone accounts for \$10 billion of the tab, according to recent data from Healthentic, a Seattle-based analytics company.

While 87% of those prescribed an opioid over the four-year study period didn't show a cause for concern, the remaining 13% had the following signs that could indicate a cause for concern:

- 10 or more opioid prescriptions;
- A prescribed supply for 120 days or longer;
- A week or more of overlapping opioid or benzodiazepine prescriptions.

Also see: [The high price tag of not taking an Rx. and how employers can help](#)

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The bad news: the 13% of the population with opioid prescription abuse are responsible for 92% of employer's costs, the report notes. Moreover, 7% of the population with two or more opioid prescriptions accounted for more than 80% of the cost burden to employers.

"Prescription drug abuse can often masquerade as other problems," cautions Michael Rogers, CEO of iFocus: Human Capital Solutions, a consulting firm.

He advises employers to encourage all workers to take advantage of the employee assistance programs. "Don't make assumptions, don't assume they [employees] have a problem," he notes, "but be sure to point to the programs where they can get the support and treatments they need."

To address opioid abuse, employers must use a multipronged approach, Healthentic says.

For example, employers need to educate employees on the risks of opioid drug use to avoid misuse in the first place, and increase understanding about proper disposal of unused medications, the report notes. Education should include information about options available for medication disposal such as "take back" programs, Healthentic notes.

Also see: [Employers expected to tackle health care costs through wellness](#)

Among other suggestions, the report notes:

- Insist on conservative prescribing guidelines for participating providers in all health programs;
- Know who is at risk in the company's specific population, using HIPAA-compliant technology and targeting those individuals;
- Increase and ensure confidential access to treatment.

"Opioid misuse costs employers in multiple ways, including more medical costs and productivity loss," says Jeff O'Mara, CEO of Healthentic. "Employers have a unique opportunity to help people get more productivity for less money by identifying and engaging the people at risk."

View Healthentic's study [here](#).



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