

Addressing Substance Use and Cannabis Policies in Summer Workplaces



Summer brings unique challenges for employers across Canada. Longer daylight hours, seasonal workforces, outdoor job sites, and increased social activities can all contribute to heightened workplace safety risks. While cannabis has been legal for recreational use in Canada since 2018, its legalization has not diminished employers' responsibility to maintain safe workplaces. As a result, HR directors and workplace leaders should review substance use policies each summer to ensure they remain effective, compassionate, and legally compliant.

Why Summer Can Increase Workplace Risks

Many industries experience increased activity during the summer months. Construction, agriculture, landscaping, transportation, tourism, and recreation sectors often rely on seasonal workers, extended shifts, and physically demanding outdoor work. These conditions can amplify the risks associated with impairment from cannabis, alcohol, prescription medications, or other substances.

For example, a construction worker operating heavy machinery, an agricultural employee handling equipment during harvest, or a commercial driver transporting goods may face serious safety hazards if their judgment, reaction time, or coordination is impaired. Summer heat can further complicate matters, as dehydration and heat stress may produce symptoms that resemble impairment or worsen the effects of certain substances.

In addition, seasonal employees may be younger workers with limited experience navigating workplace substance use expectations, making clear communication and training particularly important.

Recognizing Early Warning Signs

Addressing substance use concerns early can help prevent incidents, injuries, and long-term employee health issues. However, employers should focus on observable workplace behaviours rather than attempting to diagnose substance use disorders.

Some signs that may warrant further observation or discussion include:

- Frequent lateness or unexplained absences.
- Sudden declines in performance or productivity.

- Difficulty concentrating or following instructions.
- Increased workplace errors or safety violations.
- Changes in mood, irritability, or unusual behaviour.
- Poor coordination, balance, or reaction time.
- Slurred speech or confusion.
- Neglect of personal appearance or hygiene.
- Increased conflicts with coworkers or supervisors.

It is important to recognize that many of these indicators may also result from stress, fatigue, mental health challenges, medical conditions, or personal issues. Managers should avoid making assumptions and instead focus on documented observations and workplace performance concerns.

Creating a Compassionate Response

When a potential substance use issue arises, employers should approach the situation with professionalism, respect, and empathy. Substance dependence is often recognized as a disability under Canadian human rights legislation, which means employers may have a duty to accommodate employees to the point of undue hardship.

A supportive approach may include:

- Conducting private, respectful conversations.
- Focusing on observed workplace behaviours rather than suspected substance use.
- Referring employees to available support resources, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs).
- Exploring accommodation options where appropriate.
- Encouraging employees to seek professional assistance.

Employees are generally more likely to seek help when they feel supported rather than punished.

Developing an Effective Cannabis and Substance Use Policy

A strong workplace policy should clearly communicate expectations while balancing safety obligations and employee rights.

Effective policies typically include:

Clear definitions of impairment. Employees should understand that impairment from cannabis, alcohol, medications, or other substances may create safety risks regardless of whether the substance is legal.

Fitness-for-duty expectations. Outline that employees must be fit to perform their duties safely throughout their shift.

Reporting requirements. Specify when employees must disclose medications or conditions that may affect their ability to work safely, while respecting privacy requirements.

Investigation procedures. Explain how concerns about impairment will be assessed and documented.

Accommodation processes. Describe how employees can request support or accommodation when substance use is linked to a disability or medical condition.

Training and education. Provide managers and workers with regular training on impairment recognition, reporting procedures, and available support resources.

Balancing Safety and Compliance

The most effective substance use policies recognize that workplace safety and employee well-being are not competing priorities. By establishing clear expectations, identifying concerns early, and providing access to support, employers can reduce risk while fostering a culture of trust and accountability.

As summer work ramps up across Canada, now is an ideal time for HR leaders to review policies, refresh training programs, and ensure their organizations are prepared to address substance use concerns fairly, consistently, and legally.