



CASE STUDY: DrugWise

DrugWise was established in January this year, taking over from our previous charity DrugScope which folded in 2015. DrugWise aims to provide evidence-based information not just on drugs, but also alcohol and tobacco because it is ridiculous not to regard these other substances as drugs as well. But it is drugs and drug use which is such an emotional and fraught subject. There is much ignorance and misinformation peddled around, especially in the less responsible media. But even in the media more widely because of space and time, a complex issue such as this is often reduced to sound or word bites. So the DrugWise website is full of information about drugs which we are in the process of steadily updating. You will also find a comprehensive directory of drug services for those looking for help and advice. For those who want to keep up with all the news and latest research in this field, we have a sister site called DS Daily.

By its very nature, construction work is heavy duty manual labour and so it is perhaps not surprising that some workers will seek out drugs to give them that extra burst of energy and strength. Some of these would be the very same performance enhancing drugs that are often at the centre of elite sports scandals. Heading that list would be anabolic steroids.

Anabolic steroids

(Note: not to be confused with cortico-steroids used to treat a range of conditions including skin diseases and asthma)

Construction workers might have come across these drugs if they work out in the gym and maybe also work part-time as security guards or door staff at pubs and clubs. These drugs add to the body's natural supply of the male hormone testosterone and they are taken by sportsmen and women because they build muscle and will speed up the recovery process after injury. They are also very prevalent in the world of competition body building and even among guys who just want to look good on the beach without putting in all the hard training.

Anabolic steroids come with significant risks attached. There are many different types, used for different purposes in a range of doses and combinations and for set periods of time. So only the very experienced users know how to manage this complicated process, but even they won't avoid the many risks.

Many of these drugs are available online, but potential buyers may have no idea who the seller is or where the drugs are coming from. Steroids could be fake and contain no active ingredient at all or the contents or dosages could be very different from that printed on the bottle or packet.

Even if the drugs being taken are genuine, over time the potential risks include:

- Strokes or heart attack as these drugs put the circulatory system under pressure
- Liver problems
- Acne and male pattern baldness
- The development of breast tissue
- Blood-born viruses such as hepatitis and AIDS and blood poisoning because some of the steroids need to be injected and many users don't know what they are doing – they might share infected works or inject in very unsafe places like the groin to hide the marks.
- Psychological problems. These could include so-called 'roid rage' where the user is on a very short fuse and likely to explode into violent temper because of the additional male hormone in the body. Also there is a risk of dependency because the user becomes not so much addicted to the drug, but addicted to looking big and muscular. Often this is to do with self-esteem and body image issues; it is sometimes said that those seeking to look big on the outside are compensating for feeling small on the inside.

Cocaine

Although cocaine still has that 'champagne lifestyle' image, it has become very commonly used and is in fact the second most used illegal drug in the UK behind cannabis. Cocaine is a powerful stimulant drug that hits all the reward systems in the brain which makes it a very 'more-ish' drug. The effects of a line of coke don't last very long – and then the person wants some more. Because of the stimulant effect, cocaine does make people feel on top of their game, as if nothing is impossible. They are alert, talkative and feel in charge. So the drug has found favour on construction sites both because workers feel they physically have more strength, but also because in this very male-dominated world, workers can feel psychologically 'pumped up'.

But like they say, there is no such thing as a free lunch and continued use can bring a whole range of problems. Aside from the fact that cocaine possession is illegal, it is also still relatively expensive because the effects are short-lived. This means that a serious cocaine habit will have an equally serious impact on the wallet.

From a health point of view, regular use puts a significant strain on the circulatory system exposing users to the risk of seizures, heart attacks and strokes. This risk is increased if the user is drinking alcohol as well because the two drugs together in the body create a new drug called coca-ethylene which is potentially more toxic than individual drugs.

Over time, cocaine can cause people to become very anxious and restless, even paranoid and be very difficult to handle. This is because cocaine stimulates the 'flight or fight' response in the brain, but

if there is no running away or fighting to do, then the brain is all dressed up with nowhere to go and this is what creates all these psychological problems. The other big danger is tolerance and dependence: the more you use the more you need to get the same effects and dependence is a real risk. There are no heroin-like withdrawal symptoms if you stop using, but with every up there is a down and people can feel very depressed for a long time after they stop serious, regular use.

Cannabis and other sedative type drugs

Drugs like cannabis, tranquillisers and similar drugs all have the capacity to calm the system down. The problem for construction workers is that they may impact on reflexes, speed of reaction and also the capacity to operate machinery. So for example a worker who has smoked cannabis heavily over the weekend might still have slow responses on Monday morning and in general, workers need to seek advice from their doctor or chemist about any prescribed medication or drugs they have bought over the counter.

Workplace substance misuse policies

Construction sites are safety-critical workplaces where workers depend on each other for overall health and safety. This may mean that the company has strict rules about drug and alcohol use which every worker should be told about right from the start. But employers should also have in place an element of pastoral care for workers seeking help for a substance misuse problem. Most parts of the UK have both community and residential facilities to help with these problems, although the first port of call is usually the GP. Go to <http://www.drugwise.org.uk/find-a-service/> for more information.

If you would like to discuss options for drug awareness sessions for HR staff and other senior management, please contact Harry Shapiro on harry@drugwise.org.uk

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