

## HAZARD ALERT



# OPIOID DEATHS IN CONSTRUCTION



## Why are construction workers at risk?

- ▶ Construction has one of the highest injury rates of any industry, and opioids are often prescribed to workers even with minor injuries.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ A worker can become dependent on opioids even with an initial, short-term prescription, and the chances of that happening rise sharply with longer-term use.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ A worker's risk of death increases when opioids are prescribed.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ Work-related factors—including uncertain employment, demanding jobs, discrimination, and work-family conflict—can lead to psychological distress that increases the likelihood of opioid use.<sup>4,5</sup>

## Injured construction workers often...

- ▶ Try to continue working through pain and impairment.
- ▶ Suffer a loss in income. Even if an injured worker receives workers' compensation, it rarely makes up for lost pay.
- ▶ Experience anxiety, stress, and depression, which can add to existing pain.
- ▶ Return to work before fully healed.



## Overdose deaths continue to rise

- ▶ In 2021, over 80,000 people in the U.S. died from an opioid overdose—and more than 1 in every 6 was a construction worker. Put another way, workers in the industry are 15 times more likely to die from an overdose than from an injury on the jobsite. In 2022, for example, there were 17,967 overdoses and 1,092 fatal injuries among construction workers.<sup>6,7</sup>
- ▶ While there are many reasons that construction workers might take opioids, one study found that more than half of those who died from an overdose had suffered a job-related injury.<sup>8</sup>

## PROTECT YOURSELF!

### 1 Prevent Injuries

Work shouldn't hurt—your employer must provide a safe workplace to prevent an injury from occurring.

A commitment to safety reduces the risk of both acute and chronic injuries and therefore the need for pain medication.

Follow safe work practices.



Getting help lifting heavy materials can reduce the risk for injury.

### 2 Talk to a Doctor

Opioids are addictive and can have side effects. Opioids are addictive and can have side effects, so they should be the last option to treat your pain. If opioids are prescribed they should be used for the shortest possible time. Discard any unused

If your doctor gives you a prescription, ask about:

- ▶ Other forms of pain medication that are not addictive and have fewer side effects.
- ▶ Other forms of pain management, such as physical therapy or acupuncture.

### 3 Get Help

Opioids change how your brain works. They trigger one part of it to demand more opioids and make it harder for another part of it to resist them.<sup>9</sup>

Check with your union or employer to find out if they have a program to help, such as:

- ▶ an employee assistance program (EAP); or
- ▶ member assistance program (MAP).

Or ask your doctor for help to find the best addiction treatment option for you.

**Remember addiction is an illness that can be treated.**

## If you or someone you know needs help:

- ▶ Contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Hotline at <https://www.samhsa.gov/> or call their confidential hotline: **1-800-662-HELP (4357)**.
- ▶ Visit the Recovery Resource online hub: <https://www.recoveryresourcehub.org/prescription-medica>
- ▶ Contact your union.
- ▶ Find a list of common opioids at: <https://bit.ly/common-opioids>.
- ▶ Give your doctor the Physicians' Alert on Pain Management among Construction Workers from: <https://bit.ly/physicians-alerts>.

## Find out more about construction hazards.

To receive copies of this Hazard Alert and cards on other topics

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Sources: 1) CPWR, The Construction Chart Book, 2018, Chart 38e. 2) Freeman A, Davis KG, Ying J, Lang DA, Huth JR, Liu P. Workers' compensation prescription medication patterns and associated outcomes. doi: 10.1002/ajim.23306. 3) Shah A, Hayes CJ, Martin BC. Characteristics of Initial Prescription Episodes and Likelihood of Long-Term Opioid Use. doi: <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6610a1>. 4) Chen APG, Nwaogu JM, Naslund JA. Mental Ill-Health Risk Factors in the Construction Industry: Systematic Review. doi: 10.1061/(asce)co.1943-7862.0001771. 5) Dannerlein JT, Eylon M, Garverich S, Weinstein D, Manjournides J, Vallias SP, Lincoln AK. Associations Between Work-Related Factors and Psychological Distress Among Construction Workers. doi: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000002311. 6) The Demolition of Workers' Comp. <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-demolition-of-workers-compensation>. 7) NVSS Mortality Data and 7/BL5 CPOI Data. Calculations by CPWR's Data Center. 8) Cheng et al. Comparison of Opioid-Related Deaths by Work-Related Injury. American Journal of Industrial Medicine 56:308-316. 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.22138>. 9) National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens. Out of Control: Opioids and the Brain. 2018. <https://teens.drugabuse.gov/blog/post/out-control-opioids-and-brain>