

# Podcast: Opioids and Worker Health

**Narrator:** Construction work is an occupation laden with the risk of different injuries and pain. Opioids are a class of drugs that are commonly prescribed to treat pain, but the addictive nature and illegal use of these drugs brings about many concerns for the health and safety of workers involved in construction and other jobs.

Joining us to talk about opioids and worker health today is Chris Cain, executive director for CPWR – The Center for Construction Research and Training and chair of the Opioid Task Force for North America’s Building Trades Union.

Cain says construction workers, like those in other high-injury risk occupations, can experience a wide range of painful injuries that could potentially lead to obtaining an opioid prescription.

**Cain:** It could be a bone break where treatment is needed for that break. It could be a shoulder injury where a worker may be told that they need surgery, but, for whatever reason, there's a delay in getting the surgery in place, so the pain has to be managed in other ways. But, really, we think the largest numbers are related to general musculoskeletal disorders that occur in construction workers from both repetitive tasks, vibration, strains and sprains, and other injuries associated with what can be heavy lifting, pushing, and other activities that happen in construction.

**Narrator:** Cain says research and anecdotal case studies show that opioids prescribed after an occupational injury can very well lead to development of a substance use disorder. Certain types of opioids, such as fentanyl, are highly potent, and misuse of them can lead to fatal overdoses.

**Cain:** Construction workers are experiencing fatal overdoses at many times the level of other workers. So, we're particularly concerned about these overdoses in the population of construction workers.

**Narrator:** CPWR is devoted not only to preventing work-related injuries, but also to educating construction workers on the risks of opioids and providing them with information on safer alternatives.

Cain and her colleagues have developed tools, such as the “toolbox talk” and “hazard alert”, to raise workers’ awareness on issues related to opioids. She says both tools are aimed at the worker at the jobsite. In addition, they are available online for free and can be adapted and used for other populations.

**Cain:** A hazard alert is a short card about opioids and pain and the risks of accepting that first prescription for opioids, and then a toolbox talk is a tool to use for training on the job that happens typically at the beginning of a workday. These are two tools that we're trying to put out there in the construction industry to raise awareness about the issue, but also to start the conversations on substance use disorders with an effort to de-stigmatize these disorders.

**Narrator:** Cain says in addition to CPWR’s efforts, their parent organization, the North America’s Building Trades Union (NABTU), is promoting and using a public health model to tackle the opioid epidemic among workers by focusing on prevention, support, and recovery.

**Cain:** The primary prevention methods are really about preventing injuries, and the secondary prevention methods are about interrupting the prescription of opioids in the first place. The NABTU task force is also

tackling how to deal with and support construction workers who have developed a substance use disorder in their seeking of treatment as well as in the process of their recovery.

**Narrator:** In addition, there are concerns about workers in other occupations, such as emergency personnel and law enforcement, who may be inadvertently exposed to opioids during on-the job duties.

Cain says if workers have concerns about opioid exposure or misuse in their workplace, that they should talk to their employers. For some unions, there are peer support networks available that workers can reach out to.

**Cain:** For those first responders who have workplace exposure unexpectedly to some of these powerful opioids there's some really great training materials that's been put out by NIEHS they should take advantage of and implement.

For workers who have occupational injuries or pain that leads them to seek ways to control that pain, it's really about understanding what the prescriptions do, what they contain, and what the risks are. There's a lot of alternative pain management programs and protocols that have been proven to be much more effective in dealing with work-related injury pain versus the prescribed opioids that seem to be the first line of what some doctors will prescribe.

**Narrator:** Cain says the efforts of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, and other federal agencies to reduce the impact of opioid-related issues in the workplace is very encouraging. She stresses that more research is needed to better understand the various social and economic factors that are contributing to these issues. This research could potentially identify solutions to prevent fatal overdoses and create safer workplace conditions.

Thanks to today's guest, Chris Cain, for joining us. You can find links to the materials mentioned in this podcast and learn more about opioids and worker health, as well as how other WTP grantees are addressing this issue on our website at [niehs.nih.gov/podcasts](http://niehs.nih.gov/podcasts).

Like what you are hearing or have suggestions to help us improve the podcast? Please take a few minutes to provide feedback by going to [research.net/r/peph\\_podcasts](https://research.net/r/peph_podcasts).

You've been listening to Environmental Health Chat. Our podcast is brought to you by the Division of Extramural Research and Training at NIEHS, part of the National Institutes of Health, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.