According to a new Quest Diagnostics study, employers saw the highest rate of positive workforce drug test results since 2003. As expected, marijuana was the most detected drug, including in states where marijuana remains illegal. The study reported a surge in positive results in the Midwest for cocaine, methamphetamine and marijuana. However, the report found a decline in positive opioid tests for 2019.

The Quest Diagnostics report provided encouraging results on the types of testing triggering positive results. As in prior years, for-cause testing produced the highest percentage of positive results, followed by follow-up and return-to-duty testing. The report also highlighted the industries producing the most positive results – the Retail Trade Industry had the overall highest positive rate and the Other Services category (grantmaking, advocacy, and providing personal services) also had a high rate. The Accommodation and Food Service category had the highest positive rate for marijuana.
While the opioid trend sounds promising, there is concern about how COVID-19 will influence substance use, including opioid use. As Quest Diagnostics observed, COVID-19 may “prove to be an accelerant” on the trend toward overall higher positivity rates. To that end, other sources have reported concern about opioid use during the COVID-19 pandemic. In July 2020, the National Institute on Drug Abuse presented “Effects of COVID-19 on the Opioid Crisis: Francis Collins with Nora Volkow.” Dr. Volkow expressed concern about a 20% spike in overdose reports. However, the numbers are not yet available.

Dr. Volkow explained that COVID-19 can impact recovery in many aspects, including potential loss of a support system, difficulty accessing treatment programs, and a decline in the number of individuals seeking treatment from the emergency room.

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences recently published Opioids and the Workplace: Prevention and Response. The institute reported that “in the last two months, at least 30 states have reported increases in opioid fatalities since the start of the pandemic.” The institute also identified multiple COVID-19 related factors that are likely driving these trends, including social isolation, home isolation (e.g., loss of in-person recovery meetings, anxiety, loss of contacts), work related stress (i.e., loss of income, inadequate safety measures, job loss or reduction in hours, fear of being infected with COVID-19 or infecting family members), and work-related ergonomics related to social distancing or remote work. The report also highlights the potential for different impacts in diverse communities.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some employers have decreased or stopped conducting drug testing. However, as the country begins to re-open it may be a good time to reassess the best strategies to minimize drug use in the workplace. One part of the solution includes supporting employees who may be faced with stressful personal circumstances, including offering resources to deal with stress (such as employee assistance programs). It may also be a good time to review drug testing programs and consider how to make those programs more effective in the world of remote work.

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