

## Potentially Driver-Impairing Medications

Many Rx/OTC medications (taken as prescribed) have the potential to impair driving as well as the performance of other safety-sensitive duties.

PDI medications have been a topic of research by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) for over a decade. PDI medications are those with known effects on the central nervous system, blood sugar levels, blood pressure, vision, or otherwise have the potential to interfere with driving skills. PDI medication effects may include sedation, hypoglycemia, blurred vision, hypertension, dizziness, fainting, and loss of coordination.

Lists of PDI medications which have been developed as a result of research should not be considered all-inclusive, nor should they be considered 'hit lists.' Rather, they should be considered as guides to the types of medications that can cause driver impairments. They can also be used to inform your safety-sensitive employees of the danger of taking these medications while performing safety-sensitive functions. Similarly, medications that have not been identified as PDI should not necessarily be considered safe.

Ultimately, a physician or other HCP must decide if an employee can perform his or her safety-sensitive functions, taking into consideration the employee's medical condition with the medications used to treat the condition as well as all medications taken by the employee.

## Resources

For information on potentially driver-impairing medications and other related topics, go to the NHTSA website at [www.nhtsa.gov](http://www.nhtsa.gov).

Look for the following publications regarding Rx/OTC medications at [www.fta.dot.gov](http://www.fta.dot.gov).

*Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medication Toolkit*

*FTA Quarterly Drug and Alcohol Program Updates*

Companion Pieces: *Employee Brochure*

# Balancing Rx/OTC Programs WITH Employee Safety and Health



## What an **Employer** Should Know



U.S. Department of Transportation  
Federal Transit Administration

**Please note** that this brochure contains best practices only; FTA does not have regulations regarding Rx/OTC

## Background

For over a decade, the Federal Transit Administration has expressed concern about prescription and over-the-counter (Rx/OTC) medication use by safety-sensitive employees and the impact the use of these medications can have on transit system safety.

As an employer of safety-sensitive employees, you are encouraged to establish a program which fosters a partnership between management, employees, and their prescribing health-care professionals (HCPs) or pharmacists to address this concern. It is vital for you to be aware of how Rx/OTC medications may affect your employees' ability to perform safety-sensitive functions and to address it as part of your Rx/OTC Program.

## Rx/OTC Policies

Every employer of safety-sensitive employees is encouraged to have a comprehensive policy to address Rx/OTC medication use. FTA's recommended components include:

- Reporting and monitoring the use of Rx/OTC medications.
- Obtaining medical input (from a licensed health-care professional) to evaluate the impact Rx/OTC medication use may have on safety-sensitive employees.
- Removing safety-sensitive employees from duty when impaired and/or using Rx/OTC medications impairing driving or the performance of other safety-sensitive functions.
- Defining the roles and responsibilities of employer managers and supervisors.
- Establishing consequences for violating policy provisions for the use and reporting of Rx/OTC medications.
- Determining confidentiality protections regarding records.

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## Employee Education

Establish clear and ongoing communication with your employees to ensure ongoing, regular safety meetings and training on your transit system's policies and program. Emphasize the need for your employees to balance the safe performance of their required job functions with the responsible use of Rx/OTC medications. Explain the importance of discussing with their prescriber, pharmacist, or other health-care professional their medical needs and treatment plans in light of their safety-sensitive job duties.

## Confidentiality

Employers should respect and protect their employees' privacy and confidentiality as it relates to medical conditions, treatments, and medication use. Rx/OTC medication authorization forms, discussions of medical conditions related to Rx/OTC medications, and associated records should conform to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

## Partnering with HCPs to Make Informed Decisions

Assist health-care professionals (HCPs) in developing Rx/OTC medication and treatment plans that take into consideration the employee's safety-sensitive functions by requiring employees to provide these communication aids to their HCP:

**Safety-Sensitive Job Functions.** Job descriptions to inform HCPs about safety-sensitive job duties their patients are required to perform.

**Rx/OTC Medication Authorization Forms.** Forms to document the HCP's determination regarding the employee's ability to perform safety-sensitive functions while using Rx/OTC medications.

OTC medications, in particular, cause some of the most common and serious impairments due to their widespread use and a belief that OTCs are safer than prescription medications. The following, while not all-inclusive, contains many of the most commonly used potentially driver-impairing (PDI) OTC medications: anti-diarrhea medications, antihistamines, and medications to treat cold and flu symptoms, including pseudoephedrine, and various products which contain combinations of alcohol, antihistamines, decongestants, or dextromethorphan.

Even though most transit professionals acknowledge that the misuse or abuse of Rx medications is a serious safety issue, many do not understand that even responsible and correct use of some Rx medications can impact safety. Similarly, there is a widespread belief that unless a prescription has a warning label, it is safe to drive. This view does not take into consideration multiple medication interactions, underlying medical conditions, and central nervous system effects other than drowsiness.

Common prescription medications that are considered PDI include, but are not limited to, narcotic analgesics, antidepressants, anti-diabetic agents, anti-anxiety agents, anti-hypertensives, and skeletal muscle relaxants, all of which have the potential to impair driving.

For more information on PDI medications, please go to the NHTSA website, at [www.nhtsa.gov](http://www.nhtsa.gov).

## Encourage Proactive Care

In addition to policies and procedures to address Rx/OTC medication use, employers should encourage proactive care. Best practices include:

- Offering health screening/risk assessments by a HCP to address current medical conditions requiring Rx/OTC medication use or conditions that are not being treated.
- Encouraging employees to engage in healthy lifestyles.
- Implementing programs to encourage a “culture of proactive health care” such as weight management, stress reduction, nutrition classes, smoking cessation, and exercise.

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