

The aftermath of a night on the town- a look at the dangers of working machinery with a “hang-over”

It has been a tough day. You make your way home, sit down in front of the TV, pop open a beer and unwind. You sit down for dinner and have another, and another. Before you know it, you have had too much. It's been a rough day, and you need to let loose, you invite some friends out and before you know it, its 3 am, you are lying in bed and you can't remember how you got there. The situation of how it starts may differ, but the end result is always the same- illness and fatigue.

What is the impact of a hangover on a worker whom is in charge of operating heavy machinery?

The body reacts to alcohol the way it would withdraw from a drug addiction. Your body hurts due to inflammation, your heart gets put under strain as the effects of anxiety are heightened, endorphins crash and dehydration sets in, and not to mention the effects on your stomach - your body loses its ability to absorb minerals and vitamins for a period of time. Your brain function lessens by up to half as an overuse of dopamine takes place when intoxication sets in and the body goes into a state of orthostatic hypotension, causing dizziness and nausea.

It is obvious that these effects on a worker operating a crane, forklift or heavy machinery could easily result in accident, or even death. The Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) laws make provision for this. It states that no employer may legally allow an employee onto site if they are or appear to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs. This includes tell tail signs of smelling like alcohol or exhibiting symptoms of a hangover. In such a case, the employer is liable for more serious repercussions than the employee should an accident occur.

It is management's function to ensure the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Policy is compiled and ratified. Importantly, they need to ensure that employees comply. The formulation of the Policy is a crucial process and requires input from all levels of management, and a fair amount of policy content will be decided upon from the results of past experience in dealing with the problem.

Rhys Evans, MD of ALCO-Safe has some tips and pointers for the employer in such a situation. The OHS laws are complex and the systems and procedures can be tricky. The construction industry is rife with companies that are not aware of the consequences that the business is liable for, should correct procedure with regards to alcohol and substance abuse not be correctly implemented. It is important to speak to an industry professional in order to gain the information required in order to be compliant and risk free.