

work do you begin to suspect that something is wrong. If the person is someone you have worked with for a long time, substance abuse may be the farthest thing from your mind as you try to discover the cause of these changes. Abuse of drugs and/or alcohol can affect most organs of the body. In addition to the physical signs caused by damage done to the liver, kidneys, and other organs, certain behaviors can signal substance abuse. Some of the most common physical symptoms are as follows:

- Changes in sleep habits (either too much or too little energy alters sleep patterns)
- Excessive weight change
- Excessive sweating
- Excessive tremors
- Confusion
- Poor coordination or slow reflexes
- Jaundice
- Dilated or constricted pupils
- Needle marks

Some behaviors signaling substance abuse are as follows:

- Poor work performance
- Sloppy work and frequent mistakes
- Moodiness, including restlessness, irritability, withdrawal, defensiveness, and violent temper outbursts
- Forgetfulness
- Change in personal hygiene (e.g., clothes, bathing)

Additional possible signs and symptoms of substance abuse in a health-care coworker are summarized in Box 4-6.

These signs may not positively indicate drug or alcohol abuse, but they should trigger an investigation into the cause of these changes to protect patients and coworkers, as well as the employee. Typically, people who are addicted may deny substance abuse or minimize the effects of their habit. If you have noticed that someone is impaired, you must focus on ensuring that the person receives treatment.

### Treating Substance Abuse

Follow your agency's protocol on referral of impaired employees for substance abuse treatment. Many employers have employee assistance programs or support groups organized through the human resources department. If a patient or family member is suspected of substance abuse, again follow your agency's protocol. Usually, the issue is discussed with the physician before any action is taken.

Be familiar with local resources for treatment, so you can help your colleague or patient by suggesting community resources. Patients and/or families may also come to you for advice about helping a loved one. Having these resources on hand will help them, too.

#### BOX 4.6 Signs of Possible Substance Abuse in a Coworker

- Is frequently late or absent from work because of "illness"
- Spends an inappropriate time away from patients and makes strange excuses for the absences
- Documents poorly
- Does not keep scheduled appointments
- Has difficulty working with many staff members
- Relates to patients unprofessionally