• **Stick to the facts.** Document the facts objectively, completely and in a timely manner to ensure accuracy.

• Where the RN’s ability to give safe care is in question, the RN must not practise until it is safe to do so. Client care may need to be reassigned to other staff to ensure safety is maintained.

**You can get help from the following agencies or individuals:**

- employee assistance programs
- occupational health nurse
- supervisor/manager
- union representative
- CARNA
- Alberta Health Services Addictions and Mental Health
- family physician/ addictions specialist
- Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous

**What should I expect when I seek help for myself or a fellow RN?**

Treatment will be based on the needs of the RN and may include interventions such as; detoxification, education, counseling, peer support, drug screening and 12-step programs. With rehabilitative help, most RNs can return to their jobs to provide safe and competent care.

**Other sources of information:**

- HealthLink Alberta

*If you have a concern or question about alcohol or drug problems in the work setting, or about the performance of a registered nurse, please contact:*

College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta  
11620 – 168 Street  
Edmonton AB T5M 4A6

Tel: (780) 451-0043  
Toll free: 1-800-252-9392  
Fax: (780) 452-3276  
Email: carna@nurses.ab.ca  
Website: www.nurses.ab.ca

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**Problematic Substance Use: Are You Affected?**

**College & Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta**

May 2010
Problematic substance use refers to situations in which the use of drugs or alcohol interferes with the ability of the registered nurse to practice in a safe, competent and ethical manner. Problematic substance use can progress into dependency and/or addiction and is considered an illness.

Why do I need to know about problematic substance use?
Nurses demonstrating problematic substance use are at risk of harming clients, themselves and colleagues as well as damaging the public’s trust in the employer and in the nursing profession.

The role of the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) is to promote safe, competent, ethical care by all registered Nurses. CARNA provides support to anyone with concerns or questions about nursing care in Alberta, including questions about problematic substance use by nurses.

Professional Responsibility
RNs have a professional responsibility to protect clients from harm.

WARNING SIGNS
Being aware of warning signs of problematic use of drugs or alcohol can help you or a colleague get assistance and prevent harm.

Consider the following warning signs to determine if you or a colleague may have a drug or alcohol problem. These signs, alone or in combination may not necessarily be related to problematic substance use.

However, they do indicate that the individual is requiring help.

1. Performance Signs
   - gradual deterioration in performance
   - illogical or sloppy charting and errors in judgment, particularly with medications
   - requests for change in work schedule or assignment that may increase access to drugs
   - unexplained absences from work
   - prolonged breaks, unexplained absences from work area during shifts
   - unexplained discrepancies between recorded medication administration and expected client responses
   - observable pattern of medication discrepancies during specific shifts
   - recurring pattern of failure to ensure observation or co-signing for narcotic wastage

2. Physical Signs
   - evidence of memory loss or confusion
   - slurred speech, shakiness, hand tremors, unsteady gait
   - bruising, minor burns, abrasions
   - dilated or constricted pupils, watery or red eyes
   - profuse perspiration, runny nose, frequent colds

3. Other Behaviors
   - increasing isolation from colleagues, friends and family
   - frequent reports of illness, minor accidents, emergencies
   - mood swings, irritability, depression, suicide threats or attempts, paranoia, defensiveness, euphoria
   - noticeable deterioration or exaggerated attention to hygiene (e.g. strong breath freshener, perfume as a cover-up)
   - wearing long-sleeves at all times
   - unexplained appearances at work on days off

Denial of the problem
Often the person with problematic substance use will deny that there is a problem. Co-workers may try to explain or excuse unacceptable performance or behavior, rather than consider the possibility of a drug or alcohol problem. The sooner appropriate intervention is initiated, the better, for both clients and the RN. Admitting there is a problem is the hardest step.

What should I do if warning signs are present?

- Protect client care. You must take action to ensure that care delivery remains safe if warning signs are present. Your first responsibility is to protect clients from harm.
- Get help. If you question your own use of drugs or alcohol, remove yourself from the work setting and seek assistance
- If you are worried about the work performance of a colleague, consider discussing your concerns with them privately. If the RN is unable to seek help, indicate that you will need to follow-up with your manager.
- If you do not wish to discuss concerns directly with your colleague, you should report concerns directly to your manager for follow-up