Issue brief: Reports of increases in opioid-related overdose and other concerns during COVID pandemic

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As the COVID-19 global pandemic continues, so does the nation’s opioid epidemic. The AMA is greatly concerned by an increasing number of reports from national, state and local media suggesting increases in opioid-related mortality—particularly from illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. More than 40 states have reported increases in opioid-related mortality as well as ongoing concerns for those with a mental illness or substance use disorder in counties and other areas within the state. This also includes new reports about the need for evidence-based harm reduction services, including sterile needle and syringe services and naloxone.

The AMA is pleased that the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have provided increased flexibility for providing buprenorphine and methadone to patients with opioid use disorder. The AMA is further pleased at increased flexibility provided by the DEA to help patients with pain obtain necessary medications.

The AMA urges governors and state legislatures to take action

- Governors must adopt the new SAMHSA and DEA rules and guidance in-full for the duration of the national emergency—this includes flexibility for evaluation and prescribing requirements using telemedicine;
- States must enact as part of their own Emergency Orders and other actions a complete removal of prior authorization, step therapy and other administrative barriers for medications used to treat opioid use disorder;
- States must remove existing barriers for patients with pain to obtain necessary medications. This includes removing arbitrary dose, quantity and refill restrictions on controlled substances; and
- States must enact, implement and support harm reduction strategies, including removing barriers to sterile needle and syringe services programs.

Read the full range of AMA recommendations for states to help patients with opioid use disorder and pain as well as how to further harm reduction efforts. Also see this recent discussion of the nation’s overdose epidemic by three leading physicians and national experts, including AMA Immediate Past President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA; Stephen Taylor, MD, MPH; and Charles Reznikoff, MD.

A sample of national and state reports are below.

For more information, please contact Daniel Blaney-Koen, JD, Senior Legislative Attorney, AMA Advocacy Resource Center, at daniel.blaney-koen@ama-assn.org or (312) 464-4954.
National reports

- U.S. Sees Deadly Drug Overdose Spike During Pandemic.  

- As overdoses rise during pandemic, 2 moms share their stories of loss.  

- AMA Urges Changes After Dramatic Increase in Illicit Opioid Fatalities.  

- Drug overdose deaths jump in 2019 to nearly 71,000, a record high, CDC says.  

- 'Opioid overdoses are skyrocketing': as Covid sweeps across US an old epidemic returns.  

- High Rate of Stimulant Use in Opioid ED Cases.  

- Coronavirus Crisis Disrupts Treatment For Another Epidemic: Addiction.  

- ‘Cries for help’: Drug overdoses are soaring during the coronavirus pandemic.  

- Expanded Telehealth Helps Communities Address Opioid Use Disorder During Pandemic; Practitioners see benefits for patients and providers, especially in rural areas.*  

- Pandemic unleashes a spike in overdose deaths.  

- Despite the Challenges, We Must Fight Harder to Address the Nation’s Opioid Epidemic; Patrice A. Harris, MD.  
  https://morningconsult.com/opinions/despite-the-challenges-we-must-fight-harder-to-address-the-nations-opioid-epidemic/ June 17, 2020

- A New Addiction Crisis: Treatment Centers Face Financial Collapse.  

- Substance use up amid pandemic: survey.  

- The Escalation of the Opioid Epidemic Due to COVID-19 and Resulting Lessons About Treatment Alternatives.  

- Drug overdoses climb during COVID-19 pandemic; Officials nationwide report spikes less than a year after the Trump administration touted progress in battling the crisis.  
The pandemic is triggering opioid relapses across Appalachia.  

Don’t Forget the Other Pandemic Killing Thousands of Americans.  

The pandemic may fuel the next wave of the opioid crisis.  

State reports

1. Alabama
   - Drug Overdoses Increase During the Pandemic.  
   - Madison County seeing a spike in overdoses, deaths amid pandemic.  

2. Arizona
   - Suicides, overdoses are up amid COVID-19 pandemic, according to health expert.  
   - Deaths escalated as opioids flooded tribal lands, report says.  
   - The battle of addiction during the time of novel coronavirus: Mental anguish, idle hands may be recipe for relapse.  

3. Arkansas
   - Drug overdoses skyrocket in Fort Smith during COVID-19.  
   - Number of overdose saves tops 500 through Arkansas program.  
   - Number of Narcan ‘saves’ triple during COVID-19 pandemic.  

4. California
   - Colliding epidemics: Need for ‘safe consumption sites’ more dire in COVID era, scientists and lawmakers say.  
   - A collision of epidemics: Coronavirus disrupts addiction treatment.

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5. Colorado
- Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic. https://apnews.com/bf1c11ac45d63808ffeae945c750cd81 June 28, 2020

6. Connecticut
- With over 1,000 Connecticut deaths last year, opioids demand even greater attention during pandemic, https://ctmirror.org/2020/07/09/with-over-1000-deaths-last-year-opioids-demand-even-greater-attention-during-pandemic/ July 9, 2020

7. Delaware

8. District of Columbia
- One doctor is working to fight D.C.’s opioid epidemic, even as a pandemic rages. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/one-doctor-is-working-to-fight-dcs-opioid-epidemic-even-as-a-pandemic-rages/2020/08/04/c5c1cc54-d662-11ea-aff6-220dd3a14741_story.html August 4, 2020

9. Florida
- Overdose calls up 40% during COVID-19 pandemic; treatment centers seeing relapses in long-time sober patients. https://www.firstcoastnews.com/article/entertainment/television/programs/gmj/jfrd-
• Manatee County reports 44% increase in opioid overdoses since last year. [Link] July 7, 2020
• Fake pills laced with fentanyl are causing overdoses in west Pasco, deputies say. [Link] May 5, 2020
• Jacksonville overdose calls increased 20% in March. [Link] April 13, 2020.

10. Georgia
• DPH warns of overdose increases in Georgia amid COVID-19. [Link] August 7, 2020
• Health chief warns of drug overdose increase during pandemic. [Link] June 29, 2020
• Addiction Recovery Leaders Say Opioid Crisis Didn’t Stop When Pandemic Began. [Link] April 20, 2020

11. Illinois
• Pritzker Administration Announces Over $2 million in Fines for Major Health Insurance Companies Violating Illinois Mental Health Parity Laws CIGNA Healthcare of IL, UnitedHealthcare, CIGNA Health and Life, HCSC, and Celtic found to be in violation of Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act [Link] July 15, 2020

12. Indiana
• An epidemic of their own; relapse and overdose rates surge amidst coronavirus lockdowns. [Link] August 12, 2020
• ‘There needs to be awareness’: Addiction recovery help still available during pandemic. [Link] June 16, 2020
• Naloxone Use, Opioid Overdoses Increase Amid Virus Pandemic. [Link] May 29, 2020
• An Indiana Police Dept. No Longer Reversing Overdoses During Pandemic.
https://filtermag.org/cops-naloxone-coronavirus/ April 24, 2020

13. Kentucky
   - OPD, DCSO records increase in overdoses on altered pills. https://www.14news.com/2020/05/26/opd-seeing-increase-overdoses-altered-pills/ May 27, 2020

14. Louisiana

15. Maine

16. Maryland

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17. Massachusetts
- SouthCoast doctors say telemedicine has proven its worth, hope it will continue.*
- The Pandemic Has Changed Addiction Treatment, Some Hope For Good.*
  https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2020/05/21/coronavirus-addiction-treatment-changes May 21, 2020

18. Michigan
- Naloxone kits could end up being lifesavers.
- Michigan to give opioid antidote for free to community groups, residents.
- Push to telehealth means more medication to treat addiction in northern Michigan.*
- 20% increase in patients seeking substance abuse treatment.

19. Minnesota
- In Duluth, ODs spike as pandemic decreases access to aid; The pandemic might be increasing the demand for dangerous drugs. https://www.startribune.com/in-duluth-ods-spike-as-pandemic-decreases-access-to-aid/570895192/ May 31, 2020
- St. Paul Police Issue Alert After 28 Suspected Overdoses In 6 Days, 2 Deaths.
  https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2020/03/05/st-paul-police-issue-alert-after-28-suspected-overdoses-in-6-days-2-deaths/ March 5, 2020

20. Missouri
- Opioid overdose deaths decline statewide in 2019, but rise for Black men.
- New website provides help with drug addiction for St. Louis area residents.
- Springfield area already sees uptick in suicides, ODs. Experts worry crisis is coming.

21. Montana
- Police blame super-potent heroin for one death, several overdoses.
heroin-for-one-death-several-overdoses/article_f07c07fe-7308-5efb-850d-e2fb2ba07e92.html
April 3, 2020

22. Nevada
- Fentanyl contributes to a rising death toll in Southern Nevada.
- Teen overdose deaths point to growing problem.

23. New Hampshire
- New law requires opioid treatment in county jails.*
- Opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone to be free at Planned Parenthood.

24. New Jersey
- Is the COVID-19 pandemic fueling a 20% rise in NJ overdose deaths?

25. New York
- Erie County alerts community to deaths due to suspected cocaine plus opioid overdoses.
- More New Yorkers know someone who abuses opioids or died in an overdose, Siena survey finds; More in NY touched by opioids as support for treatment grows.
- Federal Government Approves Methadone Deliveries During Pandemic.
- Opioid Addiction, Overdoses on Rise: DA.
  http://theforumnewsgroup.com/2020/06/05/opioid-addiction-overdoses-on-rise-da/ June 5, 2020
- COVID-19 cited in spike of opioid overdoses; Pandemic has worsened the opioid crisis. More people are dying of overdoses and fewer are being admitted for treatment.
- Columbia County reports second spike in overdoses since pandemic arrived.
- As overdoses spike, local experts remind people help is available. (Albany, Greene,
26. North Carolina
   - NC organizations fighting the rural opioid crisis receive a $4M federal boost. 
   - Overdoses way up, officials try new approach to fighting drug abuse during pandemic.  
     https://greensboro.com/rockingham_now/news/overdoses-way-up-officials-try-new-approach-to-fighting-drug-abuse-during-pandemic/article_863d0ae7-62b0-51f8-8df3-e9dc9396b0db.html August 7, 2020
   - Increase in overdose emergency department visits seen in Carteret County.  

27. North Dakota
   - Drug overdose death raises concerns in the area.  
   - Drug overdose deaths climb dramatically in Minot; Fentanyl use frightening. 

28. Ohio
   - Ohio drug overdose deaths back on rise. 
   - Overdose Incidents Rose Sharply Around Ohio Valley During Pandemic. 
   - Coronavirus can’t stem central Ohio opioid abuse. 
   - Don’t forget the other epidemic; editorial. 
   - Narcan handed out to step opioid overdose rise amid COVID-19.  
   - Coroner: 6 overdose deaths in Franklin County Friday. 
   - Health officials fear COVID-19 could trigger rise in drug overdoses. 
   - HEALTH ALERT: Canton latest to close its syringe program.
29. Oklahoma
- Deaths caused by fake pills continue to climb in Oklahoma, with links to North Texas. https://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/crime/article24360002.html June 17, 2020

30. Oregon

31. Pennsylvania

32. Rhode Island
- Another pandemic fallout: Deaths from accidental drug overdoses are soaring in Rhode Island. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/08/05/metro/another-pandemic-fallout-deaths-accidental-drug-overdoses-are-soaring-rhode-island/ August 5, 2020
33. South Carolina

34. Tennessee

35. Texas

36. Vermont
- As Vermont drug deaths drop, Brattleboro hits a record high. [https://vtdigger.org/2020/05/14/as-vermont-drug-deaths-drop-brattleboro-hits-a-record-high/](https://vtdigger.org/2020/05/14/as-vermont-drug-deaths-drop-brattleboro-hits-a-record-high/) May 14, 2020

37. Virginia

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38. Washington
- Public health officials warn of fentanyl in black tar heroin.  
- Seattle sees spike in fentanyl overdose deaths. https://dailyhive.com/seattle/king-county-spike-overdose-deaths April 24, 2020

39. West Virginia
- Increase in overdose deaths reported in the Northern Shenandoah Valley. 
- 'How are we going to keep people alive?' Behind the pandemic, overdoses are rising across West Virginia. https://www.wvgazettemail.com/coronavirus/how-are-we-going-to-keep-people-alive-behind-the-pandemic-overdoses-are-rising-across/article_6df7f23b-ef35-54fc-94e3-360662f5a123.html June 20, 2020
- Overdose deaths outpacing COVID-19 deaths in Tri-State area. 

40. Wisconsin
- Fentanyl overdose deaths on the rise in Milwaukee County. 
- Public health alert issued in Dane County following suspected rise in opioid overdoses. 

41. Wyoming