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

- 'Cries for help': Drug overdoses are soaring during the coronavirus pandemic. https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/07/01/coronavirus-drug-overdose/ July 1, 2020
- Expanded Telehealth Helps Communities Address Opioid Use Disorder During Pandemic; Practitioners see benefits for patients and providers, especially in rural areas.* https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2020/07/01/expanded-telehealth-helps-communities-address-opioid-use-disorder-during-pandemic July 1, 2020
- 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.
- The Escalation of the Opioid Epidemic Due to COVID-19 and Resulting Lessons About Treatment Alternatives. https://www.ajmc.com/journals/issue/2020/2020-vol26-n7/the-

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The pandemic may fuel the next wave of the opioid crisis. [April 21, 2020](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-could-trigger-opioid-relapse/

State reports

1. Alabama
   - Opioid overdoses on the rise since pandemic began. [August 18, 2020](https://www.wbrc.com/2020/08/18/opioid-overdoses-rise-since-pandemic-began/)
   - Drug Overdoses Increase During the Pandemic. [July 20, 2020](https://wbhm.org/feature/2020/drug-overdoses-increase-during-the-pandemic/)

2. Arizona
   - Suicides, overdoses are up amid COVID-19 pandemic, according to health expert. [July 18, 2020](https://www.fox10phoenix.com/news/suicides-overdoses-are-up-amid-covid-19-pandemic-according-to-health-experts)
   - The battle of addiction during the time of novel coronavirus: Mental anguish, idle hands may be recipe for relapse. [April 20, 2020](https://www.yourvalley.net/stories/the-battle-of-addiction-during-the-time-of-novel-coronavirus/154044)
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

- Beware of Potentially Fatal Fentanyl Pills Disguised as Xanax.
- Man, woman overdose in car in Redwood Village; woman dies.

5. Colorado

- Pueblo diversion program showing success,*
- How the pandemic is impacting another health crisis: opioid addiction.
- Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic.
  https://apnews.com/bf1ec11ace45d63808ffeae945c750cd81 June 28, 2020
- After COVID-19 addiction treatment may never be the same.
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](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
- Rise in fatal drug overdoses in D.C. region likely tied to pandemic, officials say. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/drug-overdose-washington-coronavirus/2020/08/20/2a4c64b8-e0a4-11ea-ade1-28daf1a5e919_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/drug-overdose-washington-coronavirus/2020/08/20/2a4c64b8-e0a4-11ea-ade1-28daf1a5e919_story.html) August 21, 2020

9. Florida
- Fake pills laced with fentanyl are causing overdoses in west Pasco, deputies say. [https://www.tampabay.com/news/pasco/2020/05/05/fake-pills-laced-with-fentanyl-are-](https://www.tampabay.com/news/pasco/2020/05/05/fake-pills-laced-with-fentanyl-are-)

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1. **Indiana**

2. **Jacksonville overdose calls increased 20% in March.**

3. **Georgia**

4. **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 [https://www2.illinois.gov/IISNews/21819](https://www2.illinois.gov/IISNews/21819) July 30, 2020

5. **Indiana**
   - ‘There needs to be awareness’: Addiction recovery help still available during pandemic. [http://www.bcdemocrat.com/2020/06/16/there_needs_to_be_awareness_addiction_recovery_help_still_available_during_pandemic/](http://www.bcdemocrat.com/2020/06/16/there_needs_to_be_awareness_addiction_recovery_help_still_available_during_pandemic/) June 16, 2020
13. Kentucky
- ‘Don’t give up’ After years of decline, Lexington’s overdose deaths are rising fast. https://www.kentucky.com/news/local/counties/fayette-county/article245379110.html August 31, 2020
- 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

17. Massachusetts
- The Pandemic Has Changed Addiction Treatment, Some Hope For Good.* [https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2020/05/21/coronavirus-addiction-treatment-changes](https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2020/05/21/coronavirus-addiction-treatment-changes) May 21, 2020

18. Michigan

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/](https://www.startribune.com/in-duluth-ods-spike-as-pandemic-decreases-access-to-aid/570895192/) May 31, 2020
20. Missouri

- Missouri’s Fentanyl Problem: State recently topped nation in rate for overdose deaths.  
- Opioid overdose deaths decline statewide in 2019, but rise for Black men.  
- New website provides help with drug addiction for St. Louis area residents.  
- Police blame super-potent heroin for one death, several overdoses.  

21. Montana

- Meth use rose as pandemic hit Montana, other states, urine tests showed.  
- County applies for opioid program.  
- Police blame super-potent heroin for one death, several overdoses.  

22. Nevada

- With opioid-related overdoses on the rise, health providers try preparing everyday Nevadans to respond to a crisis.  
- Fentanyl contributes to a rising death toll in Southern Nevada.  
- Teen overdose deaths point to growing problem.  

23. New Hampshire

- NH has seen at least 200 fatal drug overdoses so far this year.  
  https://www.sentinelsource.com/news/local/nh-has-seen-at-least-200-fatal-drug-overdoses-so-far-this-year/article_a04ea351-e402-5375-bcf6-51e4e9e49e2.html August 26, 2020
- New law requires opioid treatment in county jails.*  
- Opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone to be free at Planned Parenthood.  
24. New Jersey
- Mid Hudson overdoses spike during COVID-19 pandemic.  
- Is the COVID-19 pandemic fueling a 20% rise in NJ overdose deaths?  

25. New York
- Chautauqua County warns of potential dangerous batch of heroin.  
- 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.  

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-e9de9396b0db.html August 7, 2020


27. North Dakota


28. Ohio

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/article243600002.html June 17, 2020

30. Oregon

31. Pennsylvania
   - With overdose deaths up during the pandemic, Philadelphia fights for a legal safe injection site; "You can't put a dead person into recovery. It doesn't work that way. At Safehouse, they have a chance to live." https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/overdose-deaths-during-pandemic-philadelphia-fights-legal-safe-injection-site-n1235583 August 2, 2020.

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. Utah

37. 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
38. Virginia
- Experts discuss how COVID-19 has led to rise in overdoses in the area.
- With drug overdose cases up 60% in Richmond area, Henrico allocates $184,000 to addiction recovery, jail diversion efforts.
- Opioid Overdose Deaths Plunge in Virginia Counties After Influx of Naloxone. Harm reduction has worked, but causes for concern during pandemic remain.*

39. 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

40. West Virginia
- Drug overdoses increase during months of COVID-19 pandemic.
- 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-ef35-54fe-94e3-360662f5a123.html June 20, 2020
- Police: Three people overdose on opioids at same time, same place in North Wheeling.
- Overdose deaths outpacing COVID-19 deaths in Tri-State area.

41. Wisconsin
- Deadly Overdoses Spike in Wisconsin During Coronavirus Pandemic.
- Overdose Surge Mirrors Coronavirus Pandemic; Experts say addiction triggers compounded by stay-at-home orders and a disruption of support networks are just two contributing factors.

42. Wyoming