

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

***Updated October 6, 2020**

In addition to the ongoing challenges presented by the COVID-19 global pandemic, the nation's opioid epidemic has grown into a much more complicated and deadly drug overdose epidemic. The AMA is greatly concerned by an increasing number of reports from national, state and local media suggesting increases in opioid- and other drug-related mortality—particularly from illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. The media reports below cite data from multiple and varied sources, including national, state and local public health agencies, law enforcement, emergency medical services, hospitals, treatment centers, research journals and others.

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. This issue brief underscores the need to remove barriers to evidence-based treatment for those with a substance use disorder as well as for 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

- Adopt SAMHnew SA and DEA rules and guidance in-full for the duration of the national emergency—this includes flexibility for evaluation and prescribing requirements using telemedicine;
- Support the removal of prior authorization, step therapy and other administrative barriers for medications used to treat opioid use disorder; meaningful enforcement of mental health and substance use disorder parity laws is long overdue
- Remove existing barriers for patients with pain to obtain necessary medications. This includes removing arbitrary dose, quantity and refill restrictions on controlled substances; and
- 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.

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

- **The Opioid Crisis, Already Serious, Has Intensified During Coronavirus Pandemic.** <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-opioid-crisis-already-serious-has-intensified-during-coronavirus-pandemic-11599557401> September 8, 2020
- **Opioid overdoses on the rise during COVID-19 pandemic, despite telemedicine care.** <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/opioid-overdoses-rise-covid-19-pandemic-telemedicine-care/story?id=72442735> August 24, 2020
- **U.S. Sees Deadly Drug Overdose Spike During Pandemic.** <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/08/13/901627189/u-s-sees-deadly-drug-overdose-spike-during-pandemic> August 13, 2020
- **As overdoses rise during pandemic, 2 moms share their stories of loss.** <https://www.today.com/health/overdoses-rise-during-coronavirus-pandemic-moms-speak-out-t188420> August 5, 2020
- **AMA Urges Changes After Dramatic Increase in Illicit Opioid Fatalities.** <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/934548> July 24, 2020
- **Drug overdose deaths jump in 2019 to nearly 71,000, a record high, CDC says.** <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/15/health/drug-overdose-deaths-2019/index.html> July 16, 2020
- **'Opioid overdoses are skyrocketing': as Covid-19 sweeps across US an old epidemic returns.** <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/09/coronavirus-pandemic-us-opioids-crisis> July 9, 2020
- **High Rate of Stimulant Use in Opioid ED Cases.** <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/933527> July 7, 2020
- **Coronavirus Crisis Disrupts Treatment For Another Epidemic: Addiction.** https://khn.org/news/coronavirus-crisis-disrupts-treatment-for-another-epidemic-addiction/?utm_source=National+Conference+of+State+Legislatures&utm_campaign=e7504bd7d3-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_07_07_03_18&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1716623089-e7504bd7d3-377887712 July 6, 2020
- **'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
- **Pandemic unleashes a spike in overdose deaths.** <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2020/06/pandemic-unleashes-a-spike-in-overdose-deaths-1959428?source=email> June 29, 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.
- **A New Addiction Crisis: Treatment Centers Face Financial Collapse.** <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/06/15/865006675/a-new-addiction-crisis-treatment-centers-face-financial-collapse> June 15, 2020
- **Substance use up amid pandemic: survey.** <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/501923-substance-use-up-amid-pandemic-survey> June 9, 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-escalation-of-the-opioid-epidemic-due-to-covid19-and-resulting-lessons-about-treatment-alternatives> July 2020

- **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.** <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/05/27/drug-overdoses-climb-during-covid-19-pandemic/> May 27, 2020
- **The pandemic is triggering opioid relapses across Appalachia.** <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/14/health/opioids-addiction-appalachia-coronavirus-trnd/index.html> May 14, 2020
- **Don't Forget the Other Pandemic Killing Thousands of Americans.** <https://www.thedailybeast.com/opioid-deaths-surge-during-coronavirus-in-americas-overdose-capitals> May 4, 2020
- **The pandemic may fuel the next wave of the opioid crisis.** <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-may-fuel-the-next-wave-of-the-opioid-crisis/> April 21, 2020

State reports

1. Alabama

- **Overdoses on the rise in pandemic.** <https://mountaineagle.com/stories/overdoses-on-the-rise-in-pandemic,28650> September 30, 2020
- **Opioid overdoses on the rise since pandemic began.** <https://www.wbrc.com/2020/08/18/opioid-overdoses-rise-since-pandemic-began/> August 18, 2020
- **Drug Overdoses Increase During the Pandemic.** <https://wbhm.org/feature/2020/drug-overdoses-increase-during-the-pandemic/> July 20, 2020
- **Madison County seeing a spike in overdoses, deaths amid pandemic.** <https://www.rocketcitynow.com/article/news/local/madison-county-seeing-a-spike-in-overdoses-deaths-amid-pandemic/525-021e43d6-44de-4c50-99ee-a326f2394a22> May 13, 2020

2. Arizona

- **Amid COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid epidemic rages on: Here are resources to get help.** <https://www.abc15.com/news/rebound/keeping-you-safe/amid-covid-19-pandemic-the-opioid-epidemic-rages-on-here-are-resources-to-get-help> September 16, 2020
- **Flagstaff police report spike in fentanyl overdoses, deaths.** <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2020/09/01/flagstaff-police-report-spike-fentanyl-overdoses-deaths/5657984002/> September 1, 2020
- **Tucson's rise in drug overdose deaths could be linked to pandemic.** https://tucson.com/news/tucsons-rise-in-drug-overdose-deaths-could-be-linked-to-pandemic/article_ed773af2-5dfc-5fc6-85c1-2ddd0b9cde02.html https://tucson.com/news/tucsons-rise-in-drug-overdose-deaths-could-be-linked-to-pandemic/article_ed773af2-5dfc-5fc6-85c1-2ddd0b9cde02.html August 18, 2020
- **Health officials report increases in drug overdoses, suicides during COVID-19 pandemic.** <https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2020/08/11/health-officials-report-increases-in-drug-overdoses-suicides-during-covid-19-pandemic/> August 11, 2020
- **Suicides, overdoses are up amid COVID-19 pandemic, according to health expert.** <https://www.fox10phoenix.com/news/suicides-overdoses-are-up-amid-covid-19-pandemic-according-to-health-experts> July 18, 2020
- **Deaths escalated as opioids flooded tribal lands, report says.** <https://katu.com/news/recover-northwest/report-deaths-skyrocketed-as-opioids-flooded-tribal-lands> June 30, 2020
- **The battle of addiction during the time of novel coronavirus: Mental anguish, idle hands may be recipe for relapse.** <https://www.yourvalley.net/stories/the-battle-of-addiction->

[during-the-time-of-novel-coronavirus,154044](#) April 20, 2020

3. Arkansas

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<https://talkbusiness.net/2020/09/achi-opioid-prescriptions-falls-29-in-three-year-period/>
September 10, 2020
- **Drug overdoses skyrocket in Fort Smith during COVID-19.**
<https://www.arkansasnews.com/news/20200809/drug-overdoses-skyrocket-in-fort-smith-during-covid-19> August 9, 2020
- **Number of overdose saves tops 500 through Arkansas program.**
<https://www.fox16.com/news/local-news/number-of-overdose-saves-tops-500-through-arkansas-program/> June 10, 2020
- **Number of Narcan ‘saves’ triple during COVID-19 pandemic.**
<https://www.thv11.com/article/news/health/opioids/saving-a-generation/number-of-narcan-saves-triple-during-covid-19-pandemic/91-20cbe0b2-8cf1-454f-9ac7-493e1e1a7546> April 22, 2020

4. California

- **3 San Diegans Die Daily from Opioid, Other Drug Overdoses.**
<https://www.countynewscenter.com/3-san-diegans-die-daily-from-opioid-other-drug-overdoses> September 25, 2020
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- **Colliding epidemics: Need for ‘safe consumption sites’ more dire in COVID era, scientists and lawmakers say.** <https://missionlocal.org/2020/07/colliding-epidemics-need-for-safe-consumtion-sites-more-dire-in-covid-era-scientists-and-lawmakers-say/> July 20, 2020
- **A collision of epidemics: Coronavirus disrupts addiction treatment.**
<https://calmatters.org/projects/california-coronavirus-treatment-drugs-opioid-addiction/> June 23, 2020
- **Beware of Potentially Fatal Fentanyl Pills Disguised as Xanax.**
<https://www.fresnosheriff.org/media-relations/beware-of-potentially-fatal-fentanyl-pills-disguised-as-xanax.html> May 13, 2020
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<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/public-safety/story/2020-04-30/male-female-car-occupants-die-of-apparent-drug-overdoses> April 30, 2020

5. Colorado

- **Drug overdoses in Colorado surged along with stress and loneliness caused by the pandemic.** https://gazette.com/premium/drug-overdoses-in-colorado-surged-along-with-stress-and-loneliness-caused-by-the-pandemic/article_198535b2-f795-11ea-ab5c-a7c418c451b0.html September 27, 2020
- **Colorado sees drug overdoses rise with coronavirus-related stress.**
<https://www.denverpost.com/2020/09/28/colorado-drug-overdose-rise-covid-stress/>
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- **Pueblo diversion program showing success.***
<https://www.chieftain.com/news/20200823/pueblo-diversion-program-showing-success>
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- **How the pandemic is impacting another health crisis: opioid addiction.**

- <https://www.9news.com/article/news/local/next/coronavirus-pandemic-impacting-opioid-addiction-health-crisis/73-3010b7cc-86be-4009-a8e8-c66b9e1e15ac> August 22, 2020
- **Fentanyl And Meth Fuel Record Colorado Overdose Deaths Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.** <https://www.cpr.org/2020/08/07/colorado-fentanyl-meth-overdose-deaths-coronavirus-pandemic/> August 7, 2020
 - **Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic.** <https://apnews.com/bf1c11ac45d63808ffae945c750cd81> June 28, 2020
 - **After COVID-19 addiction treatment may never be the same.** https://www.gjsentinel.com/opinion/columns/after-covid-19-addiction-treatment-may-never-be-the-same/article_cf73cf6e-a9d9-11ea-8370-7358eaef6d90.html June 8, 2020
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6. **Connecticut**
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 - **Coronavirus CT News: Drug overdose increase in Connecticut linked to coronavirus pandemic.** <https://abc7ny.com/ct-news-connecticut-covid-19-coronavirus-update/6397299/> August 31, 2020
 - **Overdose Deaths on the Rise in CT Amid COVID-19 Pandemic.** <https://www.nbcconnecticut.com/news/local/governor-to-hold-news-conference-on-addiction-overdoses/2324688/> August 27, 2020
 - **Two epidemics taking a toll in CT as opioid overdoses rise amid coronavirus.** https://www.connecticutmag.com/health-and-science/twin-epidemics-taking-a-toll-in-ct-as-opioid-overdoses-rise-amid-coronavirus/article_c4e0eb86-d4d1-11ea-ab35-f7ab9cf49d13.html August 2, 2020
 - **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-oxioids-demand-even-greater-attention-during-pandemic/> July 9, 2020
7. **Delaware**
- **Commissioner Navarro Partners with Aquila to Distribute Overdose Medication.** <https://news.delaware.gov/2020/07/20/commissioner-navarro-partners-with-aquila-to-distribute-overdose-medication/> July 20, 2020
 - **Providers say drug and alcohol use up during pandemic following record year of Delaware overdoses.** <https://www.delawarepublic.org/post/providers-say-drug-and-alcohol-use-during-pandemic-following-record-year-delaware-overdoses> June 21, 2020
 - **Suspected Overdose Deaths for May in Delaware Tie Previous Monthly High Set in 2018.** <https://news.delaware.gov/2020/06/16/suspected-overdose-deaths-for-may-in-delaware-tie-previous-monthly-high-set-in-2018/> June 16, 2020
8. **District of Columbia**
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- **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-averaging-15-overdose-calls-a-day-group-provides-narcan-training-in-response/77-fa78a385-d445-4e64-b31c-bcabb57a0925> July 23, 2020
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- **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-causing-overdoses-in-west-pasco-deputies-say/> May 5, 2020
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<https://www.news4jax.com/news/local/2020/04/14/jfrd-jacksonville-overdose-calls-increased-by-20-in-march/> April 13, 2020

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- **'An Epidemic Within This Pandemic': Reported Drug Overdoses Rise In Georgia Amid COVID-19, Groups Say.** <https://www.wabe.org/nonprofits-respond-to-a-reported-rise-in-overdoses-in-georgia-amid-the-pandemic/> August 31, 2020
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- **Health chief warns of drug overdose increase during pandemic.**
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- **Addiction Recovery Leaders Say Opioid Crisis Didn't Stop When Pandemic Began.**
<https://www.gpbnews.org/post/addiction-recovery-leaders-say-opioid-crisis-didnt-stop-when-pandemic-began> April 20, 2020

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- **COVID-19's true toll in Illinois is likely higher than reported. A closer look at 'excess deaths' in 2020.** <https://www.chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-dataviz-coronavirus-covid-excess-deaths-illinois-20200828-1lxjzyrnxc5hjptuudce2t7ty-story.html> September 1, 2020
- **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-IDOI_Press_Release.pdf July 15, 2020
- **Overdose Deaths Have Skyrocketed in Chicago, and the Coronavirus Pandemic May Be Making It Worse.** <https://www.propublica.org/article/overdose-deaths-have-skyrocketed-in-chicago-and-the-coronavirus-pandemic-may-be-making-it-worse> May 30, 2020.
- **COVID-19 pandemic causes needle exchange programs to cut back.** <https://abc7chicago.com/needle-exchange-programs-chicago-syringe-coronavirus-program-covid-19/6206885/> May 23, 2020.
- **DuPage sees 'unusual spike' in overdose deaths during coronavirus pandemic: coroner.** <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/5/13/21257820/dupage-opioid-overdose-death-coronavirus-coroner-richard-jorgensen-covid-19> May 13, 2020.

12. Indiana

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- **An epidemic of their own; relapse and overdose rates surge amidst coronavirus lockdowns.** <https://www.wane.com/community/health/coronavirus/an-epidemic-of-their-own-relapse-and-overdose-rates-surge-amidst-coronavirus-lockdowns/> August 12, 2020
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- **The perfect storm: Drug overdoses spike across Kentucky as COVID-19 pandemic continues.** https://www.news-expressky.com/news/article_1b0f3e4c-d304-11ea-9b6b-4f593d08594a.html https://www.news-expressky.com/news/article_1b0f3e4c-d304-11ea-9b6b-4f593d08594a.html July 31, 2020.
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