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.

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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
- ‘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.

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State reports

1. Alabama
   • Opioid overdoses on the rise since pandemic began. https://www.wbrc.com/2020/08/18/opioid-overdoses-rise-since-pandemic-began/ August 18, 2020

2. Arizona
   • 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-
4. California


5. Colorado

- How the pandemic is impacting another health crisis: opioid addiction.

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- Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic. https://apnews.com/bf1c11ac45d63808ffea945e750cd81 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
- 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 August 21, 2020
- 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-
9. Florida


10. Georgia


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  https://www2.illinois.gov/IISNews/21819-IDOI_Press_Release.pdf  July 15, 2020


12. 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/  June 16, 2020


An Indiana Police Dept. No Longer Reversing Overdoses During Pandemic.  https://filtermag.org/cops-naloxone-coronavirus/  April 24, 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

• People who use drugs are more vulnerable to coronavirus. Here's what clinics are doing to help. https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/coronavirus/article_f80cf77e-84fa-11ea-88d5-2b37de9dd966.html May 3, 2020

15. Maine


• Overdose risk during pandemic is tragic reality for some families. https://www.pressherald.com/2020/04/20/overdose-risk-during-pandemic-is-tragic-reality-for-some-families/# April 20, 2020

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

20. Missouri
Springfield area already sees uptick in suicides, ODs. Experts worry crisis is coming.  
May 16, 2020

21. Montana
- Meth use rose as pandemic hit Montana, other states, urine tests showed.  
September 7, 2020
- County applies for opioid program.  
July 26, 2020
- Police blame super-potent heroin for one death, several overdoses.  
April 3, 2020

22. Nevada
- With opioid-related overdoses on the rise, health providers try preparing everyday Nevadans to respond to a crisis.  
September 6, 2020
- Fentanyl contributes to a rising death toll in Southern Nevada.  
July 29, 2020
- Teen overdose deaths point to growing problem.  
https://www.kolotv.com/content/news/Teen-overdose-deaths-point-to-growing-problem-568505931.html  
March 4, 2020

23. New Hampshire
- Recovery community focuses on NH’s other health crisis.  
https://manchesterinklink.com/recovery-community-focuses-on-nhs-other-health-crisis/  
October 5, 2020
- NH has seen at least 200 fatal drug overdoses so far this year.  
August 26, 2020
- New law requires opioid treatment in county jails.*  
July 29, 2020
- Opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone to be free at Planned Parenthood.  
June 10, 2020

24. New Jersey
• New Jersey giving away 72,000 doses of Narcan to combat drug overdoses. https://abc7ny.com/drug-overdose-opioid-crisis-naloxone-narcan/6504624/ September 15, 2020


25. New York


• Chautauqua County warns of potential dangerous batch of heroin. https://www.wgrz.com/article/news/health/chautauqua-county-health-department-warns-of-potential-dangerous-batch-of-heroin/71-8ee7db03-3a3a-48e2-b124-173e857d26be August 23, 2020


• 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.
May 21, 2020

- Columbia County reports second spike in overdoses since pandemic arrived.
  overdoses-since-pandemic-arrived/article_e2493a20-85a3-11ea-993f-7bd5df43695.html
  April 23, 2020
- As overdoses spike, local experts remind people help is available. (Albany, Greene,
  Rensselaer counties) https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/As-overdoses-spike-Capital-
  Region-experts-remind-15207385.php April 17, 2020

26. North Carolina
- Opioid ODs way up, ERs see 46% case hike.
  https://greensboro.com/rockingham_now/news/opioid-ods-way-up-ers-see-46-case-
  hike/article_155a410e-fc80-11ea-b36a-a3876ce79885.html September 21, 2020
- NC organizations fighting the rural opioid crisis receive a $4M federal boost.
  https://www.northcarolinahalthnews.org/2020/08/14/ne-organizations-fighting-the-rural-
  opioid-crisis-receive-a-4m-federal-boost/ August 14, 2020
- 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
- Increase in overdose emergency department visits seen in Carteret County.
  https://wcti12.com/news/local/county-sees-increase-in-overdoses-resources-available-for-
  those-in-need April 27, 2020

27. North Dakota
- Grand Forks law enforcement, state officials report increase in opioid overdoses during
  law-enforcement-state-officials-report-increase-in-opioid-overdoses-during-pandemic
  September 8, 2020
- Drug overdose deaths climb dramatically in Minot; Fentanyl use frightening.
  https://www.minotdailynews.com/news/local-news/2020/05/drug-overdose-deaths-climb-
  dramatically-in-minot/ May 8, 2020
- Drug overdose death raises concerns in the area.
  March 10, 2020

28. Ohio
- COVID-19 not slowing drug trafficking, overdose deaths.
  deaths September 4, 2020
- Ohio drug overdose deaths back on rise.
  https://www.newarkadvocate.com/story/news/local/2020/07/20/ohio-drug-overdose-deaths-
  back-on-rise/5473138002/ July 20, 2020
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 stem opioid overdose rise amid COVID-19.

Ohio County Prosecutor: Pandemic Puts More Stress On Families Dealing With Addiction.

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

GUEST EDITORIAL: Pandemic makes fighting opioid abuse even tougher.

Oklahoma recovery center reports surge in alcohol abuse.

Deaths caused by fake pills continue to climb in Oklahoma, with links to North Texas.

30. Oregon

Opioid overdoses climbed during early months of Covid-19 pandemic in Oregon.

Illicit opioid deaths on the rise, in spite of doctors working against overdoses: report.

'People are struggling': Oregon mental health groups make call to action during COVID-19.

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


• Spike in substance abuse seen in Aiken County as coronavirus disruptions continue. https://www.aikenstandard.com/coronavirus/spike-in-substance-abuse-seen-in-aiken-county-as-coronavirus-disruptions-
34. Tennessee


35. Texas

- WilCo sees spike in opioid overdose calls, counterfeit pills. [Link](https://talk1370.radio.com/articles/wilco-sees-spike-in-opioid-overdose-calls-counterfeit-pills) (Williamson County) April 17, 2020

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/ May 14, 2020

38. Virginia

• Experts discuss how COVID-19 has led to rise in overdoses in the area. https://wset.com/news/local/localities-honor-international-overdose-awareness-day August 31, 2020

• With drug overdose cases up 60% in Richmond area, Henrico allocates $184,000 to addiction recovery, jail diversion efforts. https://richmond.com/news/local/with-drug-overdose-cases-up-60-in-richmond-area-henrico-allocates-184-000-to-addiction/article_ba6c5e48-8243-564e-b389-f6454d05f3ee.html July 10, 2020

• Opioid Overdose Deaths Plunge in Virginia Counties After Influx of Naloxone. Harm reduction has worked, but causes for concern during pandemic remain.* https://www.directrelief.org/2020/05/opioid-overdose-deaths-plunge-in-virginia-counties-after-influx-of-naloxone/ May 24, 2020

39. Washington


• Seattle sees spike in fentanyl overdose deaths. https://dailyhive.com/seattle/king-county-spike-overdose-deaths April 24, 2020

40. West Virginia


• '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-9a3e-360662f5a123.html June 20, 2020


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.**
- **Pandemic Clashes With Opioid Crisis.**
  https://www.wpr.org/shows/pandemic-clashes-opioid-crisis June 29, 2020
- **Opioid crisis getting worse during COVID-19 pandemic, medical professionals say. (Madison)**
- **Fentanyl overdose deaths on the rise in Milwaukee County.**
- **Public health alert issued in Dane County following suspected rise in opioid overdoses.**

42. Wyoming

- **Meth Involved in Majority of Cheyenne Drug Cases in 2019.**