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

*Updated October 31, 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 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;
- 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

© 2020 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.
National reports

- The Opioid Crisis, Already Serious, Has Intensified During Coronavirus Pandemic. [Source](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-opioid-crisis-already-serious-has-intensified-during-coronavirus-pandemic-11599557401) September 8, 2020
- As overdoses rise during pandemic, 2 moms share their stories of loss. [Source](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. [Source](https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/934548) July 24, 2020
- High Rate of Stimulant Use in Opioid ED Cases. [Source](https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/933527) July 7, 2020
- ‘Cries for help’: Drug overdoses are soaring during the coronavirus pandemic. [Source](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.* [Source](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-
• 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. 
  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
• 1/4 of Arizona voters say the opioid crisis has become less important to them following 
  the pandemic, reveals survey. https://prescottnews.com/index.php/2020/10/28/1-4-of-
arizona-voters-say-the-opioid-crisis-has-become-less-important-to-them-following-the-pandemic-reveals-survey/ October 28, 2020


3. Arkansas


4. California


- 3 San Diegans Die Daily from Opioid, Other Drug Overdoses.  

- Pandemic is Not Only Killing COVID-19 Patients, But Those With Opioid and Drug Addiction.  

- Colliding epidemics: Need for ‘safe consumption sites’ more dire in COVID era, scientists and lawmakers say.  

- A collision of epidemics: Coronavirus disrupts addiction treatment.  

- Beware of Potentially Fatal Fentanyl Pills Disguised as Xanax.  

- Man, woman overdose in car in Redwood Village; woman dies.  

5. Colorado

- Deaths in Colorado rose 20% during first 6 months of pandemic, reflecting COVID-19's broader toll on health.  

- Drug overdoses in Colorado surged along with stress and loneliness caused by the pandemic.  

- Colorado sees drug overdoses rise with coronavirus-related stress.  

- Pueblo diversion program showing success.*  

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

- Fentanyl And Meth Fuel Record Colorado Overdose Deaths Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.  

- Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic.  
  https://apnews.com/bf1c11ac45d63808ffeac945e750cd81 June 28, 2020

- After COVID-19 addiction treatment may never be the same.  

- Struggling with addiction in quarantine? You’re not alone.  
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
9. Florida


10. Georgia

- Some Georgia Hospitals Are Reporting A Rise In Trauma Cases. [https://www.wabe.org/some-georgia-hospitals-are-reporting-a-rise-in-trauma-cases/](https://www.wabe.org/some-georgia-hospitals-are-reporting-a-rise-in-trauma-cases/) October 5, 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 [https://www2.illinois.gov/IISNews/21819-IDOI_Press_Release.pdf](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.bedemocrat.com/2020/06/16/there_needs_to_be_awareness_addiction_recovery_help_still_available_during_pandemic/](http://www.bedemocrat.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

- 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_f80cf7ce8-84fa-11ea-88d5-2b37dc9dd966.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-
16. Maryland

- As opioid deaths remain near record highs, Maryland offers $50 million in new grants. 
  50-million-in-new-grants October 28, 2020
- Overdoses and alcohol-related deaths rising during pandemic. 
  https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/overdoses-and-alcohol-related-deaths-rising-during-
  pandemic/2020/09/23/1c96d684-fd9e-11ea-b0e4-350e4e60cc91_story.html September 23, 2020
- In the shadow of COVID-19, opioid crisis continues unabated attack. 
  https://www.fredericknewspost.com/opinion/columns/in-the-shadow-of-
  covid-19-opioid-crisis-continues-unabated-attack/article_e3e6347d-1ea2-
  5a6e-869e-02f6bda56297.html August 17, 2020
- Drug overdose alert issued in Carroll County. 
  https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/carroll/news/cc-carroll-overdose-alert-july-31-
  20200731-23bd6fwt5zh5rpdprqawaji-story.html July 31, 2020
- Health officials say COVID-19 might be worsening opioid crisis. 
  https://www.times-
  crisis/article_57e05f07-8018-5b7a-b678-a3cce8d8d.html July 7, 2020
- Opioid-related deaths make a disappointing uptick in early 2020, possibly related to 
  coronavirus.  
  https://www.baltimoresun.com/health/bs-hs-overdose-deaths-first-quarter-
  20200611-r5pyzqrfb3ndvwc2oh3y7cy-story.html June 11, 2020
- Pandemic cited as Md. opioid fatalities inch up. 

17. Massachusetts

- ‘A perfect storm’: Pandemic is making it harder to kick drugs. 
  https://www.patriotledger.com/news/20201027/a-perfect-storm-pandemic-is-making-it-
  harder-to-kick-drugs September 30, 2020
- Sounding the alarm: Seeing warning signs of an epidemic within the COVID pandemic (Viewpoint). 
  https://www.masslive.com/opinion/2020/08/sounding-the-alarm-seeing-
  warning-signs-of-an-epidemic-within-the-covid-pandemic-viewpoint.html August 30, 2020
- SouthCoast doctors say telemedicine has proven its worth, hope it will continue.* 
  https://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/20200528/southcoast-doctors-say-telemedicine-has-
  proven-its-worth-hope-it-will-continue May 28, 2020
- 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

- Target 8: Fatal ODs doubled in parts of W. MI at COVID-19’s spring peak. 
  19s-spring-peak/ October 29, 2020
- Macomb County medical board: EMS opioids overdose treatment up during COVID-19. 
  https://www.macombdaily.com/news/local/macomb-county-medical-board-ems-opioids-
  overdose-treatment-up-during-covid-19/article_0571f7500-e3fe-11ea-bb48-
  c7f2d0f6945a.html August 24, 2020


• Push to telehealth means more medication to treat addiction in northern Michigan.* https://www.interlochenpublicradio.org/post/push-telehealth-means-more-medication-treat-addiction-northern-michigan May 7, 2020


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


20. Missouri


21. Montana

• Meth use rose as pandemic hit Montana, other states, urine tests showed. https://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/crime-and-courts/meth-use-rose-as-
12. Montana

- 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

- Fentanyl overdoses increase in Nevada, Placer counties causing concerns.
  October 14, 2020

- 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
  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.
  September 15, 2020

- Mid Hudson overdoses spike during COVID-19 pandemic.
  September 8, 2020

- Overdose deaths in NJ may hit record high.
  September 5, 2020

- Is the COVID-19 pandemic fueling a 20% rise in NJ overdose deaths?
  July 9, 2020

25. New York

- Jefferson County public health issues overdose warning in response to four known overdoses within last 24 hours. [Link](https://www.nny360.com/communitynews/healthmatters/jefferson-county-public-health-issues-overdose-warning-in-response-to-four-known-overdoses-within-last/article_c64f66c6-e634-5d21-8511-8760c0a4710f.html) September 14, 2020
- Chautauqua County warns of potential dangerous batch of heroin. [Link](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. [Link](http://theforumnewsroup.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. [Link](https://www.investigativepost.org/2020/05/21/covid-19-cited-in-spike-of-opioid-overdoses/) May 21, 2020
- As overdoses spike, local experts remind people help is available. (Albany, Greene, Rensselaer counties) [Link](https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/As-overdoses-spike-Capital-Region-experts-remind-15207385.php) April 17, 2020
26. North Carolina


- 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](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


• Coroner: 6 overdose deaths in Franklin County Friday. [Link](https://www.nbc4i.com/news/local-news/coroners-6-overdose-deaths-in-franklin-county-friday/) April 25, 2020


• HEALTH ALERT: Canton latest to close its syringe program. [Link](https://www.harmreductionohio.org/covid-19-updates-syringe-programs-ongoing/) March 29, 2020

29. Oklahoma

• Authorities investigate additional deaths in Oklahoma linked to fake oxycodone pills. [Link](https://www.koco.com/article/authorities-investigate-additional-deaths-in-oklahoma-linked-to-fake-oxycodone-pills/34314735#) October 8, 2020

• GUEST EDITORIAL: Pandemic makes fighting opioid abuse even tougher. [Link](https://www.enidnews.com/oklahoma/guest-editorial-pandemic-makes-fighting-opioid-abuse-even-tougher/article_506a7186-f76e-11ea-87b8-9fb98c2de58.html) September 15, 2020


• Deaths caused by fake pills continue to climb in Oklahoma, with links to North Texas. [Link](https://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/crime/article243600002.html) June 17, 2020

30. Oregon

• OHA sees 70 percent increase in drug overdose deaths. [Link](https://kwennnewsradio.com/2020/10/30/ohas-sees-70-percent-increase-in-drug-overdose-deaths/) October 30, 2020


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-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
- SC firefighters deliver 200 opioid antidotes in effort to prevent overdoses.
- DHEC warns of increased opioid addiction in South Carolina amid pandemic.
- Health experts, recovery organizations fear ‘frightening’ rise in S.C. opioid overdoses.
- Spike in substance abuse seen in Aiken County as coronavirus disruptions continue.

34. Tennessee
- Hamilton County overdoses spike during COVID-19 pandemic as leaders worry about long-term effects for people in recovery.
- Experts concerned about recent spike in overdose deaths amid pandemic.
- COVID-19 hurting efforts to combat overdose deaths; Knox Co. DA looks to community for help.
- Knox County sees increase of overdose-related deaths since start of coronavirus pandemic.
- Nashville doctors say they’ve seen a rise in polydrug overdoses during COVID-19 pandemic.
- Opioid crisis sees impact of COVID-19 in Middle Tennessee.

35. Texas
- As drug deaths rise, County autopsy costs soar to S70K.
  https://cortlandvoice.com/2020/10/18/as-drug-deaths-rise-county-autopsy-costs-soar-to-70k/ October 18, 2020
- ‘Laced’ opioids leading to more overdoses, deaths in El Paso.
- ‘I am alone’: Opioid relapses on the rise as COVID-19 interrupts drug addiction recovery in Dallas.
- 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
- Alcohol poisoning, fentanyl use rises in Utah during pandemic. [link](https://kslnewsradio.com/1935612/utah-overdose-deaths-alcohol-fentanyl/?) October 22, 2020

37. Vermont
- As Vermont drug deaths drop, Brattleboro hits a record high. [link](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. [link](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. [link](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-f6454d05f5ee.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.* [link](https://www.directrelief.org/2020/05/opioid-overdose-deaths-plunge-in-virginia-counties-after-influx-of-naloxone/) May 24, 2020
39. Washington
   - With overdose deaths on the rise in King County, family hopes son’s story saves lives. [https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/as-overdose-deaths-are-on-the-rise-one-family-hopes-to-save-lives-with-sons-story/281-8a64e997-165f-4756-a0c7-2aa1d22ce2fe](https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/as-overdose-deaths-are-on-the-rise-one-family-hopes-to-save-lives-with-sons-story/281-8a64e997-165f-4756-a0c7-2aa1d22ce2fe) October 20, 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-94e3-360662f5a123.html](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

41. Wisconsin
   - Public health alert issued in Dane County following suspected rise in opioid overdoses.

42. Wyoming