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

*Updated December 9, 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 strongly recommends** that all of the flexibilities that have been put in place by DEA during the COVID-19 PHE be kept in place at a minimum until both the COVID-19 and the opioid public health emergencies come to an end.

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.

For more information, please contact Daniel Blaney-Koen, JD, Senior Legislative Attorney, AMA Advocacy Resource Center, at daniel.blaney-koen@ama-assn.org

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National reports

• 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.

• 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.

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State reports

1. **Alabama**

2. **Arizona**

3. **Arkansas**
4. California


5. Colorado


• Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic. [https://apnews.com/bf1c11ac45d63808ffeae945c750cd81](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/](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
- Despite efforts by Bowser and D.C. Council, opioid deaths hit record this year. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-opioid-deaths-2020/2020/12/05/95efba3a-34c0-11eb-b59c-ad87153d10c2_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-opioid-deaths-2020/2020/12/05/95efba3a-34c0-11eb-b59c-ad87153d10c2_story.html) December 5, 2020
- Rise in fatal drug overdoses in D.C. region likely tied to pandemic, officials say. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/drug-overdose-washington-coronavirus/2020/08/20/2a4c64ab-e0a4-11ea-ad31-28dafa1a5e919_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/drug-overdose-washington-coronavirus/2020/08/20/2a4c64ab-e0a4-11ea-ad31-28dafa1a5e919_story.html) August 21, 2020

9. Florida
abuse-mental-health-20200918-kuesqudc2vb6rkoyph2nuwjgbi-story.html September 18, 2020

- Experts: Coronavirus Contributing To Increase In Substance Abuse.
  September 1, 2020

- Overdose calls up 40% during COVID-19 pandemic; treatment centers seeing relapses in long-time sober patients.

- Manatee County reports 44% increase in opioid overdoses since last year.

- Fake pills laced with fentanyl are causing overdoses in west Pasco, deputies say.

- Jacksonville overdose calls increased 20% in March.

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/ October 5, 2020

- How to maintain emotional wellness during COVID-19.

- Updated Suspected Drug Overdose Increases in Georgia Amid COVID-19.

- ‘An Epidemic Within This Pandemic’: Reported Drug Overdoses Rise In Georgia Amid COVID-19, Groups Say.

- DPH warns of overdose increases in Georgia amid COVID-19.

- Health chief warns of drug overdose increase during pandemic.

- Addiction Recovery Leaders Say Opioid Crisis Didn’t Stop When Pandemic Began.

11. Illinois


Local accidental overdose deaths are up during pandemic. https://foxillinois.com/news/local/local-accidental-overdose-deaths-are-up-during-pandemic October 26, 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


12. Indiana


Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Drug Overdoses in Indianapolis. 

An epidemic of their own; relapse and overdose rates surge amidst coronavirus lockdowns, 

‘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

Naloxone Use, Opioid Overdoses Increase Amid Virus Pandemic. 

An Indiana Police Dept. No Longer Reversing Overdoses During Pandemic. 
https://filtermag.org/cops-naloxone-coronavirus/ April 24, 2020

Kentucky

COVID-19 blamed for increased drug overdose deaths nationwide. 

‘Don’t give up’ After years of decline, Lexington’s overdose deaths are rising fast. 

The perfect storm: Drug overdoses spike across Kentucky as COVID-19 pandemic continues. 

Kentucky Drug Overdoses Spike During COVID-19 Shutdown. 
http://www.mc.uky.edu/kiprc/pubs/files/July%202020%20KyOD2A%20final.pdf July 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

Louisiana

Opioid-related overdose deaths continue to rise in Lafayette Parish, and fentanyl a big reason why. 

Dr. Nicholas Goeders: The hidden health crisis resulting from COVID-19. 

People who use drugs are more vulnerable to coronavirus. Here’s what clinics are doing to help. 

Maine

Maine drug overdose deaths up 4% in second quarter of 2020, in part due to pandemic. 
https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/health/drug-overdose-deaths-in-maine-up-4-
16. Maryland


17. Massachusetts
• While doctors prepare to handle rise in opioid cases, access to recovery programs remains limited. [http://bunews-service.com/while-doctors-prepare-to-handle-rise-in-opioid-cases-access-to-recovery-programs-remains-limited/] December 8, 2020


• SouthCoast doctors say telemedicine has proven its worth, hope it will continue.* [https://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/local/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/commonwealth/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] May 31, 2020
20. Missouri


21. Montana


22. 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_a04dea35-1-e402-5375-bc16-51e4e49c2.html August 26, 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

Pandemic Grand Forks law enforcement, state officials report increase in opioid overdoses during pandemic. 
July 28, 2020

26. North Carolina

- Opioid ODs way up, ERs see 46% case hike. 
September 21, 2020

- NC 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. 
April 27, 2020

27. North Dakota

- Grand Forks law enforcement, state officials report increase in opioid overdoses during pandemic. 
https://www.grandforksherald.com/newsmd/coronavirus/6648974-Grand-Forks-

Drug overdose death raises concerns in the area. [https://www.newsdk.com/2020/03/10/drug-overdose-death-raises-concerns-in-the-area/] March 10, 2020

Ohio


A legacy of distrust: The racial disparities that mean many can be reluctant to seek help. [https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2020/11/12/systemic-racism-addiction-treatment-outreach-ohio-and-kentucky/3731197001/] November 11, 2020


Overdose Incidents Rose Sharply Around Ohio Valley During Pandemic. [https://wfpl.org/overdose-incidents-rose-sharply-around-ohio-valley-during-pandemic/] July 5, 2020


Coroner: 6 overdose deaths in Franklin County Friday. [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. [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. https://www.koco.com/article/authorities-investigate-additional-deaths-in-oklahoma-linked-to-fake-oxycodone-pills/34314735# October 8, 2020
- 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
- OHA sees 70 percent increase in drug overdose deaths. https://kqennewsradio.com/2020/10/30/oha-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-
In Pennsylvania, overdose deaths were falling. Then COVID-19 hit. [Source](https://thecapitoljournal.com/2020/07/30/pandemic-health-experts/)


32. Rhode Island

- Fatal drug overdose deaths in Rhode Island are on the rise. [Source](https://whdh.com/news/fatal-drug-overdose-deaths-in-rhode-island-are-on-the-rise/)
- Another pandemic fallout: Deaths from accidental drug overdoses are soaring in Rhode Island. [Source](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/08/05/metro/another-pandemic-fallout-deaths-accidental-drug-overdoses-are-soaring-rhode-island/)
- Rhode Island Sees 22% Increase in Drug Overdose Deaths. [Source](https://www.portsmouthpress.com/2020/06/23/rhode-island-sees-22-increase-in-drug-overdose-deaths/)

33. South Carolina

- Health experts, recovery organizations fear ‘frightening’ rise in S.C. opioid overdoses. [Source](https://www.live5news.com/2020/07/30/pandemic-blamed-increase-drug-overdoses/)

34. Tennessee
• COVID-19 Could Compound Holiday Suicides, Drug Overdoses.  
• MPHID: More drug overdose deaths in 2020 than in all of 2019.  
• 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
• Drug overdoses on the rise during COVID-19 pandemic, expert says.  
• As drug deaths rise, County autopsy costs soar to $70K.  
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.  
https://talk1370.radio.com/articles/wilco-sees-spike-in-opioid-overdose-calls-counterfeit-pills (Williamson County) April 17, 2020

36. Utah
• Government sues Ridley’s for alleged opioid prescription violations at Morgan grocery store.  
• COVID-19 complications likely increasing the severity of Utah’s opioid crisis.  
https://www.ksl.com/article/50049960/covid-19-complications-likely-increasing-the-severity-
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
- 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-f6454d05f5ee.html July 10, 2020

39. Washington
As doctors, we call for treatment, not incarceration, for those with drug addiction.

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-a0c7-2aa1d22cc2fe October 20, 2020

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

Overdoses increase across West Virginia, experts blame pandemic.


'Throw our people 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-94ec-3606621f5a123.html June 20, 2020


41. Wisconsin

As drug overdose deaths soar, advocates fight uphill battle.


Overdose Surge Mirrors Coronavirus Pandemic; Experts say addiction triggers compounded by stay-at-home orders and a disruption of support networks are just two


42. Wyoming