

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

National reports

- **Thousands of Northwest residents are unexpectedly dying from causes other than COVID-19.** <https://www.opb.org/article/2020/11/25/covid-19-oregon-washington-idaho-excess-deaths/> December 4, 2020
- **Overdose-Related Cardiac Arrests Observed by Emergency Medical Services During the US COVID-19 Epidemic.** <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.4218> December 3, 2020
- **“The stakes are life and death”: Addiction treatment’s Covid-19 challenge.** <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/21575602/addiction-treatment-covid-19-coronavirus-opioid-epidemic> December 1, 2020
- **Street Fentanyl Surges in Western U.S., Leading To Thousands of Deaths.** <https://www.nprillinois.org/post/street-fentanyl-surges-western-us-leading-thousands-deaths#stream/0> November 17, 2020
- **Overdose deaths appear to rise amid coronavirus pandemic in U.S.** <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/overdose-deaths-appear-rise-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-u-s-n1244024> October 20, 2020
- **The opioid crisis didn’t disappear amid the pandemic. It still calls for urgent action. Editorial.** https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-opioid-crisis-didnt-disappear-amid-the-pandemic-it-still-calls-for-urgent-action/2020/10/16/7df74fd0-0d7f-11eb-b1e8-16b59b92b36d_story.html October 16, 2020
- **Drug overdose deaths on pace for record year during coronavirus pandemic, CDC says.** <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article246469555.html> October 15, 2020
- **Opioid Deaths: America’s Other Fatal Health Crisis Hasn’t Gone Away.** <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2020-10-14/opioid-deaths-americas-other-fatal-health-crisis-continues-during-covid-19> October 14, 2020
- **Sharp Rise In Drug Overdose Deaths Seen During 1st Few Months Of Pandemic.** <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/10/14/923721544/sharp-rise-in-drug-overdose-deaths-seen-during-1st-few-months-of-pandemic> October 14, 2020
- **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.**
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- **Coronavirus Crisis Disrupts Treatment For Another Epidemic: Addiction.**
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- **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
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<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

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- **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
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- **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
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- **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
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- **Substance abuse in Arkansas a worry during pandemic, officials say.**
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 - **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.**
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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.**
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 - **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

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