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

2. Arizona
3. Arkansas

- ACHI: Opioid prescriptions fall 29% in three-year period.  
  September 10, 2020

- Drug overdoses skyrocket in Fort Smith during COVID-19.  
  August 9, 2020

- Number of overdose saves tops 500 through Arkansas program.  
  June 10, 2020

- Number of Narcan ‘saves’ triple during COVID-19 pandemic.  
  April 22, 2020

4. California

- 3 San Diegans Die Daily from Opioid, Other Drug Overdoses.  
  September 25, 2020

- Pandemic is Not Only Killing COVID-19 Patients, But Those With Opioid and Drug Addiction.  
  August 16, 2020

- Colliding epidemics: Need for ‘safe consumption sites’ more dire in COVID era, scientists and lawmakers say.  
  July 20, 2020

- A collision of epidemics: Coronavirus disrupts addiction treatment.  
  June 23, 2020

- Beware of Potentially Fatal Fentanyl Pills Disguised as Xanax.  
  May 13, 2020

- Man, woman overdose in car in Redwood Village; woman dies.  
  April 30, 2020

5. Colorado

- Drug overdoses in Colorado surged along with stress and loneliness caused by the pandemic.  
  September 27, 2020

- Colorado sees drug overdoses rise with coronavirus-related stress.  
  September 28, 2020

- Pueblo diversion program showing success.*  
  August 23, 2020

- How the pandemic is impacting another health crisis: opioid addiction.
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
COVID-19’s true toll in Illinois is likely higher than reported. A closer look at ‘excess deaths’ in 2020. [Link] 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 [Link] July 15, 2020


Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Drug Overdoses in Indianapolis. [Link] October 2020

An epidemic of their own; relapse and overdose rates surge amidst coronavirus lockdowns. [Link] August 12, 2020

‘There needs to be awareness’: Addiction recovery help still available during pandemic. [Link] June 16, 2020

Naloxone Use, Opioid Overdoses Increase Amid Virus Pandemic. [Link] May 29, 2020

An Indiana Police Dept. No Longer Reversing Overdoses During Pandemic. [Link] April 24, 2020

‘Don’t give up’ After years of decline, Lexington’s overdose deaths are rising fast. [Link] August 31, 2020

The perfect storm: Drug overdoses spike across Kentucky as COVID-19 pandemic continues. [Link] July 31, 2020

Kentucky Drug Overdoses Spike During COVID-19 Shutdown. [Link] July 2020


OPD, DCSO records increase in overdoses on altered pills. [Link] May 27, 2020

12. Indiana

13. Kentucky

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-88d5-2b37dc9dd966.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-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


• Naloxone kits could end up being lifesavers. [https://www.miningjournal.net/opinion/editorial/2020/08/naloxone-kits-could-end-up-being-lifesavers/](https://www.miningjournal.net/opinion/editorial/2020/08/naloxone-kits-could-end-up-being-lifesavers/) August 13, 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/](https://www.startribune.com/in-duluth-ods-spike-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. [link] May 16, 2020

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

22. Nevada
- With opioid-related overdoses on the rise, health providers try preparing everyday Nevadans to respond to a crisis. [link] September 6, 2020
- Fentanyl contributes to a rising death toll in Southern Nevada. [link] July 29, 2020
- Teen overdose deaths point to growing problem. [link] March 4, 2020

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

24. New Jersey
• New Jersey giving away 72,000 doses of Narcan to combat drug overdoses.  

• Mid Hudson overdoses spike during COVID-19 pandemic.  

• Overdose deaths in NJ may hit record high.  

• Is the COVID-19 pandemic fueling a 20% rise in NJ overdose deaths?  


25. New York
• Jefferson County public health issues overdose warning in response to four known overdoses within last 24 hours.  

• Mid Hudson overdoses spike during COVID-19 pandemic.  

• Chautauqua County warns of potential dangerous batch of heroin.  

• Erie County alerts community to deaths due to suspected cocaine plus opioid overdoses.  

• More New Yorkers know someone who abuses opioids or died in an overdose, Siena survey finds; More in NY touched by opioids as support for treatment grows.  

• Federal Government Approves Methadone Deliveries During Pandemic.  

• Have Drug Overdoses Spiked During the Coronavirus Crisis? It Depends Who You Ask.  

• 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.
  April 23, 2020

  April 17, 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.
  September 8, 2020

- Drug overdose deaths climb dramatically in Minot; Fentanyl use frightening.
  May 8, 2020

- Drug overdose death raises concerns in the area.
  March 10, 2020

28. Ohio

- COVID-19 not slowing drug trafficking, overdose deaths.
  September 4, 2020

- Ohio drug overdose deaths back on rise.
  July 20, 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
• Don’t forget the other epidemic; editorial. [https://www.toledoblade.com/opinion/editorials/2020/05/31/dont-forget-other-epidemic-opioids-naloxone-toledo-lucas-county/stories/20200526122] May 30, 2020
• Coroner: 6 overdose deaths in Franklin County Friday. [https://www.nbc4i.com/news/local-news/coroner-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
• GUEST EDITORIAL: Pandemic makes fighting opioid abuse even tougher. [https://www.enidnews.com/oklahoma/guest-editorial-pandemic-makes-fighting-opioid-abuse-even-tougher/article_506a7186-f76e-11ea-87b8-9f0b98c2de58.html] September 15, 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

31. Pennsylvania
• Emergency crews continue to use Narcan to prevent opioid overdose deaths.
• COVID sends opioid crisis into tailspin.
• 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.
• In Pennsylvania, overdose deaths were falling. Then COVID-19 hit.
• Cumberland County coroner's office reports an uptick in overdose deaths during coronavirus pandemic.
• Overdose deaths skyrocket in Pennsylvania during COVID-19 pandemic.

32. Rhode Island
• CODAC expanding treatment services, as R.I. sees uptick in overdoses.
• Another pandemic fallout: Deaths from accidental drug overdoses are soaring in Rhode Island.
• In COVID-19's shadow, R.I. overdose deaths spiral. This 24/7 hotline gets around barriers to offer warmth, relief, treatment.
• Rhode Island Sees 22% Increase in Drug Overdose Deaths.

33. South Carolina
• 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


35. Texas


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/](https://vtdigger.org/2020/05/14/as-vermont-drug-deaths-drop-brattleboro-hits-a-record-high/) May 14, 2020

38. Virginia


39. Washington


• Seattle sees spike in fentanyl overdose deaths. [https://dailyhive.com/seattle/king-county-spike-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-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


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41. Wisconsin

42. Wyoming