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

*Updated June 18, 2020

As the COVID-19 global pandemic continues, so does the nation’s opioid epidemic. The AMA is greatly concerned by an increasing number of reports from national, state and local media suggesting increases in opioid-related mortality—particularly from illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. More than 30 states have reported increases in opioid-related mortality as well as ongoing concerns for those with a mental illness or substance use disorder in counties and other areas within the state. This also includes new reports about the need for evidence-based harm reduction services, including sterile needle and syringe services and naloxone.

See below for select national and state examples.

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

- Governors must adopt the new 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;
- States must enact as part of their own Emergency Orders and other actions a complete removal of prior authorization, step therapy and other administrative barriers for medications used to treat opioid use disorder;
- States must remove existing barriers for patients with pain to obtain necessary medications. This includes removing arbitrary dose, quantity and refill restrictions on controlled substances; and
- States must enact, 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.

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.
National reports

- 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.

State reports

1. Alabama

2. Arizona

3. Arkansas
4. California
   - Man, woman overdose in car in Redwood Village; woman dies. 

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

6. Florida

7. Georgia

8. Illinois

9. 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
10. Kentucky

11. Louisiana

12. Maine

13. Maryland

14. 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

15. Michigan

16. 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
17. Missouri
- New website provides help with drug addiction for St. Louis area residents.  
- Springfield area already sees uptick in suicides, ODs. Experts worry crisis is coming.  

18. Montana
- Police blame super-potent heroin for one death, several overdoses.  

19. Nevada
- Teen overdose deaths point to growing problem.  

20. New Hampshire
- Opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone to be free at Planned Parenthood.  

21. New Jersey

22. New York
- 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.  
- Columbia County reports second spike in overdoses since pandemic arrived.  
- As overdoses spike, local experts remind people help is available. (Albany, Greene, Rensselaer counties)  

23. North Carolina
- Increase in overdose emergency department visits seen in Carteret County.  
24. Ohio


25. Oregon


26. Pennsylvania


27. South Carolina

28. Tennessee
   - Opioid crisis sees impact of COVID-19 in Middle Tennessee.

29. Texas
   - 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

30. 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

31. Virginia
   - Opioid Overdose Deaths Plunge in Virginia Counties After Influx of Naloxone. Harm reduction has worked, but causes for concern during pandemic remain.*

32. Washington
   - 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

33. West Virginia
   - Police: Three people overdose on opioids at same time, same place in North Wheeling.
   - Overdose deaths outpacing COVID-19 deaths in Tri-State area.

34. Wisconsin
   - 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.