

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.
- **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.** <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

1. **Alabama**
 - **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**
 - **The battle of addiction during the time of novel coronavirus: Mental anguish, idle hands may be recipe for relapse.** <https://www.yourvalley.net/stories/the-battle-of-addiction-during-the-time-of-novel-coronavirus,154044> April 20, 2020
3. **Arkansas**
 - **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.** <https://www.thv11.com/article/news/health/opioids/saving-a-generation/number-of-narcan-saves-triple-during-covid-19-pandemic/91-20cbe0b2-8cf1-454f-9ac7-493e1e1a7546> April 22, 2020

4. California

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

- **After COVID-19 addiction treatment may never be the same.**
https://www.gjsentinel.com/opinion/columns/after-covid-19-addiction-treatment-may-never-be-the-same/article_cf73cf6e-a9d9-11ea-8370-7358eaef6d90.html June 8, 2020
- **Struggling with addiction in quarantine? You're not alone.** <https://krdo.com/news/local-news/2020/04/23/struggling-with-addiction-in-quarantine-youre-not-alone/> April 23, 2020

6. Florida

- **Fake pills laced with fentanyl are causing overdoses in west Pasco, deputies say.**
<https://www.tampabay.com/news/pasco/2020/05/05/fake-pills-laced-with-fentanyl-are-causing-overdoses-in-west-pasco-deputies-say/> May 5, 2020
- **Jacksonville overdose calls increased 20% in March.**
<https://www.news4jax.com/news/local/2020/04/14/jfrd-jacksonville-overdose-calls-increased-by-20-in-march/> April 13, 2020.

7. Georgia

- **Addiction Recovery Leaders Say Opioid Crisis Didn't Stop When Pandemic Began.**
<https://www.gpbnews.org/post/addiction-recovery-leaders-say-opioid-crisis-didnt-stop-when-pandemic-began> April 20, 2020

8. Illinois

- **Overdose Deaths Have Skyrocketed in Chicago, and the Coronavirus Pandemic May Be Making It Worse.** <https://www.propublica.org/article/overdose-deaths-have-skyrocketed-in-chicago-and-the-coronavirus-pandemic-may-be-making-it-worse> May 30, 2020.
- **COVID-19 pandemic causes needle exchange programs to cut back.**
<https://abc7chicago.com/needle-exchange-programs-chicago-syringe-coronavirus-program-covid-19/6206885/> May 23, 2020.
- **DuPage sees 'unusual spike' in overdose deaths during coronavirus pandemic: coroner.**
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/5/13/21257820/dupage-opioid-overdose-death-coronavirus-coroner-richard-jorgensen-covid-19> May 13, 2020.

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
- **Naloxone Use, Opioid Overdoses Increase Amid Virus Pandemic.**
<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/indiana/articles/2020-05-29/naloxone-use-opioid-overdoses-increase-amid-virus-pandemic> May 29, 2020
- **An Indiana Police Dept. No Longer Reversing Overdoses During Pandemic.**
<https://filtermag.org/cops-naloxone-coronavirus/> April 24, 2020

10. Kentucky

- **Fatal overdoses, use of syringe exchange soar in Lexington. Some blame COVID-19.**
<https://www.kentucky.com/news/coronavirus/article242926656.html> May 28, 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

11. 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

12. 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

13. Maryland

- **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-r5pvlyzqrffo3ndvwc2oh3y7cy-story.html> June 11, 2020
- **Pandemic cited as Md. opioid fatalities inch up.**
<https://thedailyrecord.com/2020/06/10/pandemic-cited-as-md-opioid-fatalities-inch-up> June 10, 2020

14. Massachusetts

- **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

15. Michigan

- **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
- **20% increase in patients seeking substance abuse treatment.**
<https://www.fox17online.com/news/local-news/grand-rapids/20-increase-in-patients-seeking-substance-abuse-treatment> May 2, 2020

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/> May 31, 2020
- **St. Paul Police Issue Alert After 28 Suspected Overdoses In 6 Days, 2 Deaths.**
<https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2020/03/05/st-paul-police-issue-alert-after-28-suspected-overdoses-in-6-days-2-deaths/> March 5, 2020

17. Missouri

- **New website provides help with drug addiction for St. Louis area residents.**
https://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/health-med-fit/coronavirus/new-website-provides-help-with-drug-addiction-for-st-louis-area-residents/article_1b9da3e7-2fe1-50a2-9c7b-8910c12a16a4.html June 2, 2020
- **Springfield area already sees uptick in suicides, ODs. Experts worry crisis is coming.**
<https://www.news-leader.com/story/news/local/ozarks/2020/05/17/uptick-suicides-locally-mental-health-experts-warn-crisis-looms/5201866002/> May 16, 2020

18. Montana

- **Police blame super-potent heroin for one death, several overdoses.**
https://mtstandard.com/news/state-and-regional/crime-and-courts/police-blame-super-potent-heroin-for-one-death-several-overdoses/article_f07c07fe-7308-5efb-850d-e2fb2ba07e92.html
April 3, 2020

19. Nevada

- **Teen overdose deaths point to growing problem.**
<https://www.kolotv.com/content/news/Teen-overdose-deaths-point-to-growing-problem-568505931.html> March 4, 2020

20. New Hampshire

- **Opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone to be free at Planned Parenthood.**
<https://www.vnews.com/Planned-Parenthood-clinics-in-Claremont-and-Keene-begin-offering-overdose-reversal-drug-34701777> June 10, 2020

21. New Jersey

- **Naloxone By Mail? What N.J. Addiction Help Looks Like During COVID-19.**
<https://www.wbgo.org/post/naloxone-mail-what-nj-addiction-help-looks-during-covid-19#stream/0> April 24, 2020

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.**
<https://www.investigativepost.org/2020/05/21/covid-19-cited-in-spike-of-opioid-overdoses/>
May 21, 2020
- **Columbia County reports second spike in overdoses since pandemic arrived.**
https://www.dailyfreeman.com/news/local-news/columbia-county-reports-second-spike-in-overdoses-since-pandemic-arrived/article_e2493a20-85a3-11ea-993f-7bd5dfd43695.html
April 23, 2020
- **As overdoses spike, local experts remind people help is available.** (Albany, Greene, Rensselaer counties) <https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/As-overdoses-spike-Capital-Region-experts-remind-15207385.php> April 17, 2020

23. North Carolina

- **Increase in overdose emergency department visits seen in Carteret County.**
<https://wcti12.com/news/local/county-sees-increase-in-overdoses-resources-available-for-those-in-need> April 27, 2020

24. Ohio

- **Coronavirus can't stem central Ohio opioid abuse.** <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200603/coronavirus-cant-stem-central-ohio-opioid-abuse> June 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
- **Narcan handed out to step opioid overdose rise amid COVID-19.** <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200523/narcan-handed-out-to-stem-opioid-overdose-rise-amid-covid-19> May 23, 2020
- **Ohio County Prosecutor: Pandemic Puts More Stress On Families Dealing With Addiction.** <https://www.iowapublicradio.org/post/ohio-county-prosecutor-pandemic-puts-more-stress-families-dealing-addiction#stream/0> April 29, 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 officials fear COVID-19 could trigger rise in drug overdoses.** <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200420/health-officials-fear-covid-19-could-trigger-rise-in-drug-overdoses> April 20, 2020
- **HEALTH ALERT: Canton latest to close its syringe program.** <https://www.harmreductionohio.org/covid-19-updates-syringe-programs-ongoing/> March 29, 2020

25. Oregon

- **'People are struggling': Oregon mental health groups make call to action during COVID-19.** <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/health/mental-health-and-addiction-supports-during-covid19/283-633fa303-b276-4893-8f79-349aca351f13> May 1, 2020.

26. Pennsylvania

- **Cumberland County coroner's office reports an uptick in overdose deaths during coronavirus pandemic.** https://cumberlink.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/cumberland-county-coroners-office-reports-an-uptick-in-overdose-deaths-during-coronavirus-pandemic/article_ad653521-dc48-5f8f-b6c0-359cdf90bb4d.html May 3, 2020
- **Overdose deaths skyrocket in Pennsylvania during COVID-19 pandemic.** <https://local21news.com/news/local/overdose-deaths-skyrocket-in-pennsylvania-during-covid-19-pandemic> (York and Cumberland counties) April 22, 2020
- **Syringe exchanges deemed 'life-sustaining' during Pa. coronavirus shutdown, raising hopes for eventual legalization.** <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/health/2020/03/30/syringe-exchanges-pa-prevention-point-pittsburgh-needles-covid-19-addiction-services/stories/202003300062> March 30, 2020

27. South Carolina

- **Spike in substance abuse seen in Aiken County as coronavirus disruptions continue.** https://www.aikenstandard.com/coronavirus/spike-in-substance-abuse-seen-in-aiken-county-as-coronavirus-disruptions-continue/article_beb128e4-7e59-11ea-96e3-07b824c80035.html April 15, 2020

28. Tennessee

- **Opioid crisis sees impact of COVID-19 in Middle Tennessee.**
<https://www.wkrn.com/community/health/coronavirus/opioid-crisis-sees-impact-of-covid-19-in-middle-tennessee/> May 8, 2020

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.***
<https://www.directrelief.org/2020/05/opioid-overdose-deaths-plunge-in-virginia-counties-after-influx-of-naloxone/> May 24, 2020

32. Washington

- **Public health officials warn of fentanyl in black tar heroin.**
<https://komonews.com/news/local/public-health-officials-warn-of-fentanyl-in-black-tar-heroin> June 11, 2020
- **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.**
<https://wtov9.com/news/local/police-three-people-overdose-on-opioids-at-same-time-same-place-in-north-wheeling> May 16, 2020
- **Overdose deaths outpacing COVID-19 deaths in Tri-State area.**
https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/news/special/coronavirus/overdose-deaths-outpacing-covid-19-deaths-in-tri-state-area/article_a36e41cf-8c97-5881-9aed-0668b24b67c2.html May 10, 2020.

34. Wisconsin

- **Opioid crisis getting worse during COVID-19 pandemic, medical professionals say.** (Madison) <https://www.nbc15.com/content/news/Opioid-crisis-getting-worse-during-COVID-19-pandemic-medical-professionals-say-569900351.html> April 23, 2020
- **Fentanyl overdose deaths on the rise in Milwaukee County.**
<https://www.tmj4.com/news/local-news/fentanyl-overdose-deaths-on-the-rise-in-milwaukee-county> April 17, 2020
- **Public health alert issued in Dane County following suspected rise in opioid overdoses.**
<https://www.channel3000.com/public-health-alert-issued-in-dane-county-following-suspected-rise-in-opioid-overdoses/> April 7, 2020