

IMPACTS OF COVID-19

ON SUBSTANCE USE, OPIOID OVERDOSE, AND TREATMENT



The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges for millions of adults with substance use disorders.

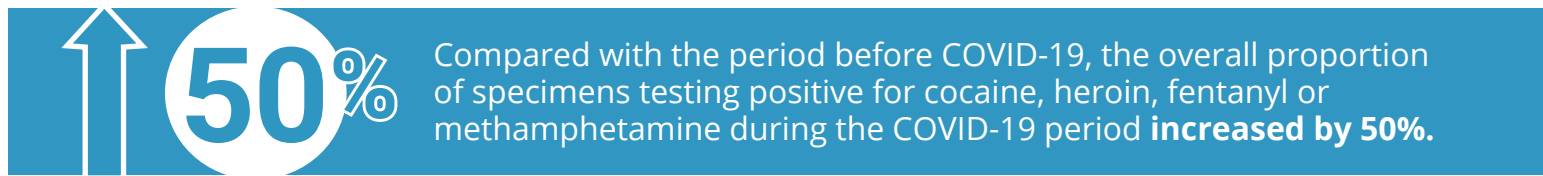
New obstacles for obtaining treatment exist as do increasing stressors, including isolation, unemployment, and illness. Complicating matters further is the timing of the pandemic, which coincided with the ongoing opioid epidemic.

The disruptions in health care and social safety nets combined with social and economic stressors have placed individuals at a heightened risk of opioid overdose:

- ◆ Nationally, overdose deaths increased 17.6% from 3/19/20 – 5/19/20 compared to the same time period last year.
- ◆ In Kentucky, compared with the previous 52 days, emergency medical service calls for opioid overdoses increased in the early weeks following the COVID-19 state emergency declaration:
- ◆ The total number of nonfatal opioid overdose visits in KY increased from 102 between March and June 2019 to 227 between March and June 2020, an increase of 123%.
- ◆ More black patients reported to the emergency room for opioid overdose in KY during the pandemic than the prior year, which is especially concerning considering they are overrepresented in COVID-19-related infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, as well as associated socioeconomic consequences.
- ◆ In Pasco County, FL, emergency medical service calls for opioid overdoses increased 371% and deaths increased 90% from March thru July 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019.



Negative social and economic consequences related to COVID-19 also places individuals in recovery at a heightened risk of relapse. Researchers found that the proportion of positive drug tests increased among a population of individuals with, or at risk, of substance use disorders:



increase in cocaine-positive tests



increase in fentanyl-positive tests



increase in heroin-positive tests



increase in Methamphetamine-positive tests

While the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the incidence of substance use and opioid overdose, it has led to opportunities to reduce overdoses by improving treatment and increasing access to care including:

- ◆ Reducing financial barriers to treatment and naloxone through the emergency expansion of Medicaid.
- ◆ Easing of restrictions on the dispensing of methadone
- ◆ Expanding the role of telemedicine in the care of patients with opioid use disorder



COVID-19 has resulted in policies that, if made permanent, have the potential to not only lessen the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on overdoses, but also improve access to proven treatments. However, COVID-19 has also introduced a number of key challenges to receiving treatment, all of which primarily affect low-income or other vulnerable populations. Therefore, the introduction of policies will not be enough to mitigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on overdoses.

It is critical to identify how these policies can be used to improve clinical practice, expand infrastructure, and address the disparities in access to health care.



References

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