

Substance Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Outline

- Context
- Responses
 - Mindful drinking
 - Syringe Service Programs
 - Harm reduction
 - Treatment
 - Federal and state treatment regulations
 - Methadone delivery system
- Q and A

CONTEXT

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Substance Use

- Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has shifted:
 - Substance use routines and settings
 - The way substance use-related support and resources are provided

How Does the COVID-19 Pandemic Affect Substance Use?

- Isolation, physical distancing
- Loss of income
- Barriers to resources and material needs
- New Yorkers are experiencing:
 - Increased anxiety
 - Increased probable depression
 - Above average financial stress
- Result: potential increase in chaotic substance use and coping with substances

How Does the COVID-19 Pandemic Affect People Who Use Drugs (PWUD)?

- Underlying health conditions increase risk for severe illness.
- Some housing environments (congregate settings, housing instability of any kind) make it difficult or impossible to follow COVID-19 prevention measures.
- Social distancing measures may increase risk of fatal overdose.
 - More people are using drugs alone.

Disruptions for PWUD

- Drug market
 - Increased risk of withdrawal due to changes in drug availability
 - Unstable drug markets contribute to chaotic drug use
 - Result: increased risk of overdose
- Syringe Service Programs (SSPs)
 - Limited program operations (staff shortages, lack of PPE, lack of soap and hand sanitizer)
 - Limited supply of sterile drug use equipment and naloxone may result in increase in blood-borne infections and fatal overdose
 - HIV and hepatitis C virus testing services suspended at some SSPs

NYC HEALTH DEPARTMENT RESPONSE

NYC HEALTH DEPARTMENT ALCOHOL-RELATED GUIDANCE

Mindful Drinking

- Stressful events like the current COVID-19 pandemic may change the way people consume alcohol.
- If possible, practice mindful drinking:
 - Take note of how much and how often you drink alcohol.
 - Space drinks over time and alternate with food and water.
 - Avoid mixing drugs (such as sleeping or pain pills) and alcohol – it can lead to overdose.

GUIDANCE FOR SAFER DRUG USE

Overdose Prevention

- Stock up on naloxone and sterile drug use equipment.
- Avoid using alone, but maintain physical distance with people you are with.
- If you live with others, let them know you are using, and create an overdose safety plan that includes having naloxone visible.

COVID-19 Prevention for PWUD

- Use disinfecting products to wipe down packing, supplies and surfaces before use.
- Prepare your drugs yourself.
- Contact your local SSP to see if they are delivering sterile supplies and naloxone.
- If you inject: avoid sharing works, rinse supplies thoroughly if reusing and do not lick the needle.
- If you use pipes, bongs, straws or e-cigarettes: avoid sharing, and use an alcohol swab to wipe down parts that touch the lips, nose or hands.

SYRINGE SERVICE PROGRAMS

How SSPs Are Responding

- New York State Department of Health considers syringe services an essential service.
 - Distributing additional safer drug use supplies per interaction
 - Increase in food distribution
- Changes vary across SSPs but include:
 - Suspension of in-person groups
 - Reduced services and hours
 - Increased number of syringes given to participants
- Most buprenorphine services continue (virtually or in-person), and many can add new participants.

Supporting SSP Programming

- NYC Health Department secured masks, non-latex gloves, hand sanitizer, sanitizing wipes and garbage bags to provide to the 14 SSPs in NYC.
 - Masks are for staff and SSP participants.
- NYC Health Department is conducting regular check-ins with contracted SSPs and released operational guidance for SSPs.

TREATMENT

Inpatient and Residential Treatment

- Physical distancing protocols include keeping some beds available for sick participants.
- Hotel options are available for:
 - Participants who become ill and cannot isolate safely in their home setting
 - Health care workers; to reduce transmission risk from setting to setting
- COVID-19 Staffing Portal allows programs to hire new staff in the event of staff shortages.

Outpatient Treatment

- Most providers have fully transitioned to remote telehealth (including telephonic) services.
- If on-site services are clinically indicated, follow social distancing protocols.
- Barriers preventing participants from engaging in treatment include growing financial support needs or not having a phone.

Major Changes to Buprenorphine Regulations

- March 31, 2020: Telemedicine can be used for buprenorphine induction and prescribing.
 - In-person examination requirement for new patients has been waived.
 - Primary care providers and SSPs are using telehealth.
 - Health + Hospitals opened a virtual buprenorphine clinic for current and new patients.

Methadone Treatment

- Methadone is highly regulated and only available at specialized clinics called Opioid Treatment Programs (OTPs).
 - Individuals in methadone treatment may experience withdrawal symptoms if they miss a dose.
- Anyone with COVID-like symptoms unrelated to a preexisting health condition must stay home.
- NYC has a large methadone population: approximately 28,800 methadone patients; over half are ages 45 and older.

Major Changes to Methadone Regulations

- March 16, 2020: Drug Enforcement Administration permits doorstep delivery of methadone to people in quarantine or isolation.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration permits methadone programs to provide medication under blanket exception.
 - Up to **14 doses** for clinically **less**-stable patients
 - **28 doses** for clinically stable patients
- NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS) provided additional guidance about dosage.

METHADONE DELIVERY SYSTEM

Methadone Delivery System

- NYC Health Department is currently working with OASAS to deliver methadone to existing methadone patients at Department of Homeless Services isolation hotels and at home.
- Methadone Delivery System (MDS) is expanding to other isolation and quarantine hotels.
- Home delivery of methadone will be prioritized for patients who:
 - Are COVID-positive or experiencing COVID-like symptoms **OR**
 - Are ages 65 and older **AND** have a chronic health condition **AND** have an OTP willing to provide a minimum of 14 days of medication

How Does MDS Work?

- Medical Directors at licensed OTPs identify eligible patients.
- NYC Health Department receives the names of patients who require OASAS and OTP delivery and fulfills the request.
- NYC Health Department staff pick up methadone doses from OTPs and deliver it to patients in their homes, or in isolation or quarantine hotels.
- The methadone arrives in a lock box for safe keeping along with a naloxone kit.

Conclusion

- The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting, and will continue to affect, substance use patterns, settings and treatment.
- NYC Health Department and provider systems are working to offer continuity of treatment and support during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Spread the word about methadone delivery, resources and treatment options to help connect people to care!

Resources

- [Alcohol Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [COVID-19: Information for People Who Use Drugs](#)
- [How to Get Opioid Use Disorder Treatment at Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Guidance on Safe Storage of Medications and Substances for Recreational Use During COVID-19](#)
- [Guidance on Opioid Prescribing During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)
- Additional languages [found here](#)