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
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