Opioid Overdose Deaths Hit an All-Time High

The death rate spiked right after the COVID-19 pandemic began.

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Fatal drug overdoses have shot up nationwide, according to a recent Health Alert Network Advisory released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“The disruption to daily life due to the COVID-19 pandemic has hit those with substance use disorder hard,” CDC director Robert Redfield, MD, said in a statement. “As we continue the fight to end this pandemic, it’s important to not lose sight of different groups being affected in other ways. We need to take care of people suffering from unintended consequences.”

Based on data from the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics, some 81,230 people died of drug overdoses in the United States in the year ending May 2020. This is the highest number recorded for any 12-month period. A sharp increase in the number of deaths was seen between March and May 2020, the same period during which COVID-19 control measures were being imposed.

Fatal overdoses dropped by 4% from 2017 to 2018 but then increased by 18% from June 2019 to May 2020. The recent numbers indicate that the opioid epidemic has worsened. In the 12-month period ending May 2020, deaths from drug overdoses rose by more than 20% in 25 states and the District of Columbia, by 10% to 19% in 11 states and New York City and by up to 9% in 10 states.

This significant increase is attributed to deaths arising from the use of synthetic opioids, such as illegally produced fentanyl. Such deaths appear to have increased by 38% in the 12-month period ending June 2020, compared with the year ending May 2020. For 38 jurisdictions with synthetic opioid data available, 37 saw increases in related fatal overdoses. Of these, 18 reported increases higher than 50%, 11 reported jumps in the 25% to 49% range, seven had increases between 10% and 24% and just one had an increase less than 10%.

In the past, most deaths arising from fentanyl use have occurred in states east of the Mississippi River. But for the years ending June 2019 and May 2020, the highest jumps in deaths from synthetic opioids were concentrated in the Western states, with 10 such states reporting a 98% increase. Jumps were also reported in 12 Southern states and the District of Columbia (35%), six Midwestern states (32%) and eight Northeastern states and New York City (21%).

During the same period, deaths from cocaine also shot up by 27%, while those from psychostimulants, such as methamphetamine, rose by 35%. Deaths from methamphetamine use have been rising faster, irrespective of synthetic opioid co-use and faster than deaths from cocaine overdose. This increase is in keeping with the rise of methamphetamine present in the illegal drug supply chain and methamphetamine-driven hospital admissions.

“The increase in overdose deaths is concerning,” Deb Houry, MD, MPH, of the CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, said in the statement. “CDC’s Injury Center continues to help and support communities responding to the evolving overdose crisis. Our priority is to do everything we can to equip people on the ground to save lives in their communities.”

According to the CDC, the use of naloxone (Narcan) and education about overdoses need to be broadened, as does awareness and access to treatment for substance use disorders. Further, individuals at high risk need early intervention, and overdose outbreaks require better surveillance and tracking.

Click here to read the CDC’s Health Alert Network Advisory.

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