

PRINT-Pandemic Fueling Growing Addiction Crisis

Suicide and addiction were the two biggest factors bringing down the average life expectancy in the U.S. before the pandemic and it's only gotten worse with the need for physical distancing and closures of public places. COVID-19 mitigation efforts have made it hard for people with [substance use disorders](#) to seek help, keep up their treatment, or access social supports.

A [study](#) by the National Emergency Medical Services Information system (NEMSIS), a large registry of more than 10,000 EMS agencies in 47 states, showed a 50% increase in overdose-related deaths since the start of the pandemic.

Sam Sears, MD, director of physician services for OSF Behavioral Health pointed out many healthy activities are limited but liquor stores are still open and street drugs are readily available.

"So people are still having access to their vices with free times on their hands so with people who are at risk that's an increased opportunity for things to go badly rather than opportunities for help and treatment," according to Sears.

Sears said some people who are years into their sobriety are doing ok but others, not so much.

"People who were less solid in their recovery though, I have a lot of worry about them and then folks that were thinking about getting into recovery but haven't started, the odds that they're getting any help or movement toward recovery are very low over this time period which means it's going to be a much harder journey for them then if they had been able to get started months ago."

Alcohol remains the number one most abused substance followed by methamphetamine. In parts of Illinois and Michigan, heroin is more commonly used because it's cheaper and more available than other opioids. Sears said incredibly dangerous synthetic fentanyl-laced opioids have infected much of the street supply and it can have deadly consequences.

"That same effect that just got them a little bit high before is now putting them into respiratory failure or outright killing them. This has taken the lives of many individuals and put many more individuals into intensive care units or emergency rooms across the country and even here in our own communities," according to Sears.

Sears warned anyone already taking medication for depression or anxiety should avoid alcohol because drinking can cancel out the positive impact of the medication. Plus, alcohol is a depressant so it is really counter-productive for someone who opts to drink to deal with their mental health struggles.

[Research](#) has shown COVID-19 could hit people with alcohol and other substance use disorders particularly hard. Because those who have addiction issues often have other underlying conditions, they are more susceptible to the highly contagious virus.

People with COVID-19 who have few to mild symptoms and want in-patient treatment for their addiction could face challenges.

"Until last week or two, they really were having people housed on medical units until they were able to test negative for COVID before they could be transferred to mental health or substance abuse treatment programming," he shared following a recent radio forum in Monmouth, Illinois.

Even if in-patient beds are available for COVID-free patients seeking help, the domino effects of unemployment during the pandemic could also mean fewer people can afford inpatient services. However, with new telehealth options and revised regulations for at-home medication assistance, substance abuse treatment experts stress just reach out because there is help. In-patient treatment centers are open and they have taken precautions to keep patients safe from COVID-19.

Dr. Sears urged anyone with a concern to call an OSF Behavioral Health navigator at (309) 308-8150.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) has a website, [Rethinking Drinking](#), that's great resource current patients or for anyone with concerns about alcohol addiction. The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Helpline](#) is a national resource available 24/7 by calling (800) 622-4357.