



Jackson County Department of Public Health

Melissa McKnight
Deputy Health Director
828-587-8288

2020-24
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 27, 2020

NAVIGATING THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The current COVID-19 pandemic has been in the forefront of our minds for the majority of 2020, and while rightfully so, it is important to remember we were already in the midst of a nationwide opioid epidemic. Jackson County Commissioners declared September as Opioid Awareness Month in Jackson County in 2019, focusing on the realities of substance use and prevention efforts. Jackson County will continue to spotlight the opioid epidemic during the month of September.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 128 people die every day in the United States from an opioid overdose. Though we are in the middle of a worldwide pandemic, the opioid epidemic has not been put on hold. In fact, research and trends show that the current public health crisis may be worsening the opioid epidemic.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) are considered an at-risk population due to their clinical, psychological and psychosocial conditions, and they are also greatly impacted by the social and economic changes linked to the pandemic. One of the most important safety measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (social distancing and isolation) has been associated with anxiety, fear, sadness, and frustration in the general public. For someone navigating SUD, the pandemic isolation can be particularly triggering, making it much more difficult to get help and/or support for treatment or to maintain sobriety. Further, the economic and financial crisis has exasperated the situation for individuals currently struggling with SUD and is also pushing vulnerable populations and at-risk individuals to develop SUD. Those with mild SUD may progress into a more severe state. (The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on substance use: Implications for prevention and treatment – National Institute of Health).

In July 2020, the American Medical Association (AMA) released a statement that more than 35 states had reported opioid-related mortality increases, particularly from illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The AMA is urging states to take action by adopting new rules and guidance in-full for the duration of the national emergency which includes flexibility for evaluation and prescribing medication assisted treatment requirements using telemedicine, and enacting, implementing, and supporting harm reduction strategies to remove barriers to programs. The opioid epidemic is yet another health crisis being made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout September, the Health Department will release a series of articles about SUD to include reducing stigmatization, realities of grandparents raising grandchildren, and more. For more information or to get involved, please contact Janelle Messer, Health Education Supervisor at (828) 587-8238 or janellemesser@jacksonnc.org

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