

COVID-19 Pandemic

Changes in Drug Testing and Positivity



How have drug testing volumes and results changed during the pandemic?



Background

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, drug monitoring decreased and drug treatment centers scaled back operations as the CDC recommended delaying nonessential healthcare. At the same time, the number of suspected overdoses rose every month from March to May of 2020.



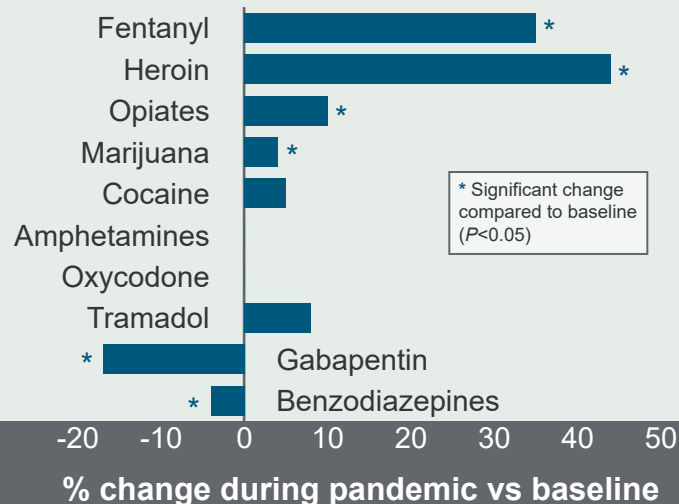
Findings

Changes in Drug Testing & Positivity During Pandemic

Drug Testing



Drug Positivity



Drug testing decreased during the pandemic. Positivity rates increased more for fentanyl and heroin than for other drugs, suggesting increased abuse of these drugs.

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Article Title: The Opioid Epidemic Within the COVID-19 Pandemic: Drug Monitoring in 2020

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Background

- To mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended the postponement of medical prevention services that could not be performed virtually.¹
- Clinical drug monitoring, which can include monitoring of nonprescribed or illicit drugs, was one service affected by the CDC recommendation. Changes in monitoring could have contributed to apparent interactions between the drug epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.
- For example, drug overdose rates in March through May of 2020 rose 18% to 42% compared to these same months in 2019.²
- **Objective:** To better understand the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and the drug epidemic, the investigators of this study analyzed changes in prescription drug monitoring and positive rates at a national clinical laboratory.

Methods

- Deidentified urine drug testing (UDT) results from January 1, 2019 to May 16, 2020 were obtained from the Quest Diagnostics database; results were included if prescription drug information was available for patients ≥18 years.
- Weekly testing volume and drug positivity rates for nonprescribed fentanyl and illicit drugs were compared between a baseline period (January 1, 2019–March 14, 2020) and a COVID-19 pandemic period (March 15–May 16, 2020).
- Risk for nonprescribed fentanyl positivity during the pandemic was compared to the baseline period.

Results

- UDT results were obtained from 872,762 specimens.
- Weekly testing volume during the study period was lower than the mean baseline volume.
 - Testing volume decreased 70% by the third week (the week starting March 29) of the study period.
 - Testing volume subsequently increased, but only to 45% below baseline volume by the final week of the study.
- Drug positivity increased for nonprescribed fentanyl and other nonprescribed or illicit drugs.
 - Positivity rates increased 35% for nonprescribed fentanyl, 44% for heroin, 10% for opiates, and 4% for marijuana ($P<0.01$ for all listed drugs).
 - Positivity for nonprescribed fentanyl also increased 89% among patients positive for amphetamines; 48% among those positive for benzodiazepines; 34% among those positive for cocaine; and 39% among those positive for opiates ($P<0.01$ for all listed drugs).
- The risk for nonprescribed fentanyl positivity increased >50% during the pandemic after adjusting for many demographic and clinical factors.

Conclusions

- These findings show that prescription drug monitoring declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, while positivity for nonprescribed drugs and dangerous drugs in combination increased.
- These trends indicate an unmet need for healthcare and public health resources that address the convergence of the drug epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic.

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Non-COVID-19 Care Framework. Updated June 30, 2020. Accessed October 13, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/framework-non-COVID-care.html>
2. Wan W, Long R. 'Cries for help': Drug overdoses are soaring during the coronavirus pandemic. *The Washington Post*. Published July 1, 2020. Accessed October 13, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/07/01/coronavirus-drug-overdose/>