



Impacts of COVID-19 Mitigation on People with Pre-Existing Substance Use and Addictions Issues

Disclaimer:

This *Quick Response Report* was published on July 9, 2020. Given the rapidly changing nature of the coronavirus pandemic, some of the references included in this report may quickly become out-of-date. We further caution readers that researchers at the Newfoundland & Labrador Centre for Applied Health Research are not experts on infectious diseases and are relaying work produced by others. This report has been produced quickly and it is not exhaustive, nor have the included studies been critically appraised.

Original Inquiry

What are the impacts of COVID-19 mitigation on non-COVID-19 populations with pre-existing substance use and addictions issues?

Summary

- Please note that, for this report, we have mainly included resources that focus on the impact of mitigation on non-COVID-19 populations with pre-existing substance use and addiction problems. In the guidance section, we included subcategories to distinguish between guidance documents exclusively about substance use and addictions and guidance documents that also discuss mental health issues. For more specific information on mental health impacts, please see our related *COVID-19 Quick Response Report* on the impacts of COVID-19 mitigation on people with pre-existing mental health conditions ([LINK](#)).
- We found a number of guidance documents, many of which focused on the impact of COVID-19 mitigation on service provision, in terms of both healthcare service providers and service users. These documents often provided guidance or recommendations on how to adapt services to pandemic conditions. We also found a set of systematic reviews collected by the Cochrane Collaboration, a number of other reviews, primary studies, and a variety of expert opinion pieces. These resources tended to examine: 1) the impacts of the disruption and/or changes in service provision for those with substance use and addiction issues; and/or 2) the impacts of isolation for people with substance use and addiction issues. In the final section of the report, we have included some relevant news articles.

Guidance Documents

Focus on substance use and addictions Issues

Public Health Agency of Canada. **Health Canada toolkit: COVID-19 and substance use**. Modified June 15, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- "...provides information to: support health care providers to understand their options in providing care for their patients who use drugs during the pandemic [and] help people who use drugs learn about services they may be able to access through a health care provider."

Government of the UK. **COVID-19: Guidance for commissioners and providers of services for people who use drugs or alcohol**. Updated May 29, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse. **Telemedicine support for addiction services**. May 15, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- "The purpose of this guidance document is to support healthcare providers to deliver telemedicine for addiction services during the COVID-19 pandemic. This document is intended to provide general guidance related to telemedicine focused on covering OAT [Opioid Agonist Therapy] and other addiction-related pharmacological treatments."

CDC. **Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Interim Guidance for Syringe Services Programs**. Page last reviewed: May 15, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- "This guidance describes actions for jurisdictional public health authorities, as well as SSPs [Syringe Service Program], to support the health and well-being of their staff and the clientele they serve."

Government of the UK. **COVID-19: Information on stopping drinking for people dependent on alcohol**. May 7, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Government of NB. **Coronavirus (COVID-19): Helpful information on substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic**. April 13, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- "Individuals who use substances often have a weakened immune system along with other conditions that place them at greater risk of getting COVID-19 infection. The following information can help increase safety during this pandemic."
- The information targets those experiencing alcohol use disorder and opioid use disorders, or other substance use disorders.

The National Health Service, UK. **Clinical Guide for the management of people with alcohol dependence during the coronavirus pandemic**. April 8, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- "Patients with alcohol dependence are a vulnerable group due to the high prevalence of co-morbid physical and mental health problems, both related to and independent of their alcohol use disorder. Due to the minimal provision of alcohol teams, identification and management will need to be undertaken by general staff."

- Lists categories of people with alcohol dependence to consider, things to consider when planning your local response, and information about safeguarding.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. **Considerations for Crisis Centers and Clinicians in Managing the Treatment of Alcohol or Benzodiazepine Withdrawal during the COVID-19 Epidemic.** March 19, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- Related Document:
 - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. **Considerations for Outpatient Mental and Substance Use Disorder Treatment Settings.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

British Columbia Centre on Substance Use. **Risk mitigation in the context of dual public health emergencies.** March, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “These guidelines are not intended for treatment of substance use disorders but rather to support individuals with substance use disorders to self-isolate or social distance and avoid risk to themselves or others.”
- “This guidance aims to support individuals who may be at increased risk of overdose, withdrawal, craving, and other harms related to their substance use.”

BC Centre for Disease Control. **People who use substances.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. **Methamphetamine, the respiratory system and COVID-19.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

- Outlines potential health risks and complications that can be associated with using methamphetamine during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is intended to be a resource for those working with and providing services for people who use substances.

European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addictions. **COVID-19 and people who use drugs.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

United Kingdom’s Royal College of Psychiatrists. **COVID-19 - Working with vulnerable people.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

- This document outlines considerations for those working with vulnerable people during COVID-19. Relevant sections include “People who use drugs” and “People with alcohol dependence.”
- Related Document:
 - Royal College of Psychiatrists. **COVID-19: Change packages.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

World Health Organization. **Alcohol and COVID-19: What you need to know.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

Focus on both substance use/addictions *and* mental health issues

Ministry of Health, New Zealand. **COVID-19: Mental health and addiction providers.** Last updated June 29, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Canadian Mental Health Association. **Policy Brief COVID-19 and Mental Health: Heading off an Echo Pandemic.** June 25, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “The aim of this policy brief on mental health and COVID-19 is to: Raise awareness about gaps in the response to COVID-19 in relation to mental health problems and mental illnesses, including problematic substance use and addictions; Share public policy recommendations that will protect the mental health of all people in Canada, including people with lived experience of mental illness and addictions, both immediately and in the “recovery phase” of COVID-19.”

United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee. **Guidance: Operational considerations for multi-sectoral mental health and psychosocial support programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic.** June 25, 2020. ([LINK](#))

American Psychiatric Association (APA). **Practice guidance for COVID-19.** Updated May 27, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- Related documents:
 - APA. **Coronavirus and mental health: Taking care of ourselves during infectious disease outbreaks.** February 19, 2020. ([LINK](#))
 - APA. **Guidance on admittance, discharge, of psychiatric patients during COVID-19.** 2020. ([LINK](#))
 - APA. **COVID-19 pandemic guidance document: Opening your practise during COVID-19.** 2020. ([LINK](#))
 - Centre for the Study of Traumatic Stress. **Taking care of patients during the Coronavirus outbreak: A guide for psychiatrists.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

Ontario Centre for Addictions and Mental Health. **Mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic.** Last updated May 20, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “It is normal to feel anxious and afraid while we deal with the effects of this pandemic. We know this situation is stressful for everyone; people living with mental illness and addictions may be finding it especially difficult to cope. If you or someone you know is struggling, the resources on this site are here to support you.”

Ontario Ministry of Health. **COVID-19 Guidance: Mental Health and Addictions Service Providers in Community Settings.** May 9, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “All MHA service providers in community settings are encouraged to implement a system for virtual and/or telephone delivery of services (including individual and group sessions) to replace in-person encounters, when and where possible. If virtual and/or telephone delivery of services cannot occur, care and treatment approaches should be adapted so that organizations can continue to provide services while maintaining physical distancing.”

U. S. A. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. **Considerations for the Care and Treatment of Mental and Substance Use Disorders in the COVID-19.** Revised May 7, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- Related documents:
 - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. **Considerations for Crisis Centers and Clinicians in Managing the Treatment of Alcohol or Benzodiazepine Withdrawal during the COVID-19 Epidemic.** March 19, 2020. ([LINK](#))
 - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. **Considerations for Outpatient Mental and Substance Use Disorder Treatment Settings.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

Panchal, N. et al. **The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use.** April 21, 2020. Kaiser Family Foundation. ([LINK](#))

WHO. **Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak.** March 18, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- Related document:
 - WHO. **Looking after our mental health.** 2020. ([LINK](#))

Systematic Reviews

Cochrane Special Collections. **Coronavirus (COVID-19): effective options for quitting smoking during the pandemic.** May 11, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Other Review Articles

CADTH. **Gabapentin, Phenobarbital, Diazepam, and Lorazepam for the Treatment of Alcohol Withdrawal: Clinical Effectiveness and Guidelines.** June 23, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “While no guidelines were identified regarding managing alcohol withdrawal during a pandemic, literature was identified regarding pharmaceutical options for treating alcohol withdrawal. Guidelines for treating alcohol withdrawal in the emergency department were also identified.”

National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools. **Rapid Review: What is the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on alcohol use and alcohol-related harms?** June 23, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Dubey, M.J. et al. **COVID-19 and addiction.** Diabetes Metab Syndr. June 9, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “This article analyses the intricate bi-directional relationship between COVID-19 and addiction.”
- “People with SUD are at greater risk of worse COVID-19 outcome. There is a surge of addictive behaviors (both new and relapse) including behavioral addiction in this period. Withdrawal emergencies and death are also being increasingly reported. Addicted people are especially facing difficulties in accessing the healthcare services which are making them prone to procure drugs by illegal means.”

Primary Research

Håkansson, A. (2020). **Changes in gambling behavior during the COVID19 pandemic—A web survey study in Sweden.** International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17(11), 4013. June 5, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “In conclusion, only a minority report increased gambling in response to the pandemic, but this group has markedly higher gambling problems and changes in alcohol consumption, and may represent a sub-group with a particularly high vulnerability. This calls for preventive action in people with higher gambling risks in response to the pandemic.”

Narasimha, V.L. et al. **Complicated alcohol withdrawal - An unintended consequence of COVID-19 lockdown.** Alcohol and Alcoholism. May 13, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Centre for the Advancement of Best Practices, Responsible Gambling Council. **The emerging impact of COVID-19 on gambling in Ontario.** May 2020. ([LINK](#))

Mental Health Research Canada and Pollara Strategic Insights. **Mental Health During COVID-19 Outbreak Wave 1.** April 2020. ([LINK](#))

Expert Opinion

Substance use and addictions issues (in general)

Crockford, D. **The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on addiction treatment.** Can J Addict. June 3, 2020. ([LINK](#))

C.SPAN. **Dr. Caleb Alexander on COVID-19 pandemic on addiction.** May 30, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “...just because the pandemic is here doesn’t mean that the overdose epidemic has gone away and in fact, in some communities, more people are dying of fentanyl, for example, than were before the pandemic started.”

Columb, D. et al. **Addiction psychiatry and COVID-19: Impact on patients and service provision.** Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine. May 21, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Kar, S.K. et al. **COVID-19 pandemic and addiction: Current problems and future concerns.** Asian J Psychiatr. April 10, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Marsden, M. et al. **Mitigating and learning from the impact of COVID-19 infection on addictive disorders.** Addiction. April 6, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “An additional concern is evidence that addictive behaviours are exacerbated when there are few other positive reinforcers in the environment—such as pleasurable things to do and people with whom to interact.”

Volkow, N. **COVID-19: Potential implications for individuals with substance use disorders.** National Institute on Drug Abuse. April 6, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Volkow, N.D. **Collision of the COVID-19 and addiction epidemics.** Annals of Internal Medicine. April 2, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- Related materials:
 - National Institutes of Health. **Coping with the collision of public health crises: Collision and substance use disorders.** NIH Director's Blog. April 21, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Opioid Use

Silva, M.J. et al. **The Escalation of the Opioid Epidemic Due to COVID-19 and Resulting Lessons About Treatment Alternatives.** The American Journal of Managed Care. July, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- Related documents:
 - McCann, M. et al. **Commentary on the coronavirus pandemic: Anticipating a fourth wave in the Opioid epidemic.** Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy. June 4, 2020. ([LINK](#))
 - Green, T.C. et al. **Opioid use disorder and the COVID-19 pandemic: A call to sustain regulatory easements and further expand access to treatment.** Substance Abuse. April 21, 2020. ([LINK](#))
 - Sun, Y. et al. **Editorial: Challenges to opioid use disorders during COVID-19.** The American Journal on Addictions. April 13, 2020. ([LINK](#))
 - Wiley, J.D. et al. **COVID-19 during the opioid epidemic - Exacerbation of stigma and vulnerabilities.** Journal of Rural Health. April 11, 2020. ([LINK](#))
 - Alexander, G.C. et al. **An Epidemic in the midst of a pandemic: Opioid use disorder and COVID-19.** Annals of Internal Medicine. April 2, 2020. ([LINK](#))
 - Becker, W.C. **When epidemics collide: Coronavirus diseases 2019 (COVID-19) and the opioid crisis.** Annals of Internal Medicine. April 2, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Alcohol Use

Clay, C.M. et al. **Alcohol use and misuse during the COVID-19 pandemic: A potential public health crisis?** The Lancet. April 8, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- “A risk factor for the onset and maintenance of alcohol misuse and alcohol use disorder is trait impulsivity... impulsivity can moderate stress-induced consumption of alcohol and is also associated with relapse in addicted individuals. Thus, this period of isolation might lead to a spike in alcohol misuse, relapse, and potentially, development of alcohol use disorder in at-risk individuals, therefore placing further strain on addiction and drug and alcohol services, and the health service in general, during and after the pandemic.”

News Articles

- The Washington Post. **'Cries for help': Drug overdoses are soaring during the coronavirus pandemic.** July 1, 2020. ([LINK](#))
- Rehab4addictions. **Mental Health & Addiction during the Coronavirus Pandemic.** May 21, 2020. ([LINK](#))
- WHO News Release. **Substantial investment needed to avert mental health crisis.** May 14, 2020. ([LINK](#))

- National Alliance on Mental Health. **The coronavirus pandemic is pushing America into a mental health crisis.** May 6, 2020. ([LINK](#))

Methodology

Newfoundland and Labrador Centre for Applied Health Research (NLCAHR) COVID-19 Quick Response reports are initiated by, and shared with, our partners in the provincial health system, including the four Regional Health Authorities, the Departments of Health and Community Services and Children, Seniors and Social Development, and public health officials.

NLCAHR staff work with topic submitters to clarify the research question. We then search for related systematic reviews, meta-analyses, other reviews, interim and other guidance statements, primary research, expert opinion and health and science reporting.

We use several search strategies, with a focus on the following databases:

- [CADTH](#)
- [Canadian Pharmacists Association](#)
- [Campbell Collaboration](#)
- [Cochrane Collaboration](#)
- [Centre for Disease Control](#) (CDC)
- [Centre for Evidence Based Medicine](#) (CEBM)
- [Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre](#)
- [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#)
- [Health Canada](#)
- [Joanna Briggs Institute](#)
- [Johns Hopkins](#)
- [MedRxiv](#)
- [National Institutes of Health](#) (NIH)
- [National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases](#) (NIAID)
- [National Library of Medicine](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada](#)
- [Trip Database](#)
- [World Health Organization](#)

This report was prepared by Sarah Mackey and Christie Warren.

For more information about *COVID-19 Quick Response Reports*, contact pnavarro@mun.ca.