

COVID-19 and substance use: One health crisis makes another one worse



September is Recovery Month

Trying to balance work and home life has never been easy. Then it all became even more challenging. Health care and other essential workers faced enormous stress. They worried about getting sick and passing it to family. People started working from home, and many others lost their jobs. Many parents were helping kids with remote learning and/or caring for an elder at home or from a distance.

So if you or someone you care about is struggling with substance use, you're not alone. For many of us, the stress of having our lives turned upside down by a global health crisis hit very close to home. Those who were managing physical or mental health and substance use problems had new challenges to face. Now they felt alone. They were disconnected from their support system or health care providers.

Before COVID-19, we could go to the gym or a movie or get together with friends. Suddenly, we couldn't rely on our healthy coping skills as much.

1 OUT OF **4** people were binge drinking at least once a week

People have been using drugs and alcohol long before COVID-19 hit. But one health crisis made another one worse. As of June 2020, 13% of Americans had started or increased substance use as a way of coping with stress or emotions related to COVID-19.¹

The CDC study found that **one out of four people were binge drinking at least once per week**. For men, the CDC defines binge drinking as having five drinks in one sitting. For women, it's four drinks. Drinking too much alcohol can cause health problems now and in the future. People may be more prone to injury from falling or car accidents. Chronic alcohol use may lead to cancer, high blood pressure and liver disease.² That's why it's so important to get the help you need to bring drinking under control – or quit drinking altogether.

One out of five people used prescription drugs for non-medical reasons. These could have been old medicines like leftover pain medications, which can alter the brain and body.³

One out of seven people had used illicit drugs. And during COVID-10, more people died of a drug overdose. The 12-month period ending in November 2020 saw the highest number of overdose deaths ever recorded in that time in the U.S. At least 90,722 people died.⁴

Many of them died alone, with no one there to call 911 or give them naloxone, an opioid-reversal agent.⁵

Synthetic opioids like fentanyl increased by almost 40% compared to the previous year. That may be a big factor in the increase in overdose deaths. Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. Due to shortages in supplies, drug dealers made fentanyl illegally. They often mixed it with heroin or cocaine. The person buying it likely didn't know they were getting something much more lethal.⁶

The pain and danger of addiction is something too many of us know all too well. But there is hope for recovery and better days ahead. Learning more about recovery can be a helpful first step towards change.



You can learn more about recovery at [liveandworkwell.com](https://www.liveandworkwell.com). Log in using your HealthSafeID® or company access code: INDIANA.



You can also connect with a specialist trained in addressing substance use. Consider calling the Optum Substance Use Disorder Helpline at **1-855-780-5955**. It's confidential and available 24/7. We understand your privacy is important.



If you're experiencing thoughts of suicide or something else that is urgent or an emergency, call 911 or the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: **988**.

1. Czeisler ME, Lane RI, Petrosky E. [Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, June 24–30, 2020](#). CDC MMWR. Published August 2020. Accessed June 2021.

2. [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Alcohol Facts and Statistics. Updated June 2021. Accessed June 2021.](#)

3. Czeisler, Lane, Petrosky.

4. [National Center for Health Statistics. Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts. CDC. Last updated June 16, 2021. Accessed June 23, 2021.](#)

5. [Abramson A. Substance use during the pandemic. American Psychological Association. March 1, 2021. Accessed June 2021.](#)

6. [CDC. What is fentanyl? Last updated Feb. 16, 2021. Accessed June 23, 2021.](#)

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