



PUBLIC HEALTH MEMO

COVID-19

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Interim Guidance for Pharmacists that Work with People Who Use Drugs

The existing evidence base about COVID-19 and its intersection with substance use disorders is limited. Fortunately, there are some measures in place for those who work with people who use substances. COVID-19's impact on the ongoing opioid overdose crisis means that healthcare and harm reduction workers must support clients to address these two significant health crises.

What are the particular risks for people who use drugs (PWUD) during the COVID-19 pandemic?

People who use substances are a particular risk group with very specific needs and may be at an increased risk of COVID-19 due to a number of physical, social and environmental reasons. They may have compromised health as a result of their use, including smoking and vaping, but use of opioids and methamphetamine especially so, because of the effects these drugs have on respiratory and pulmonary health.

- Opioids slow breathing and have already been shown to increase mortality in people with respiratory diseases - reduced lung capacity from COVID-19 could be a problem.
- Methamphetamine has been shown to produce significant pulmonary damage and this will likely increase the risk of negative outcomes if used during a COVID-19 infection.
- Vaping, like smoking, may also harm lung health, but emerging evidence suggests that exposure to aerosols from e-cigarettes harms the cells of the lung and reduces the ability to fight infection.

[\(National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020\)](#)

Continuity of Care and Contingency Planning for Those Who Use Substances

For professionals in the healthcare sector that work with people who use substances there are some unique considerations due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Some of these include the following:

- Potential medication shortage
- Community pharmacy disruption to dispensing
- Disruption of injecting equipment provision
- Patient illness or quarantine

Community Pharmacists

A patient who screens positive or is in self isolation should have someone from outside of their household to pick up their medications or the pharmacy should arrange for the delivery of medications.

Health Canada's policy position [Transportation of Controlled Substances in Canada](#) permits pharmacists to transport controlled substances to patients with an appropriate prescription. During COVID-19 the The Office of Controlled Substances has issued a short-term subsection 56(1) exemption from the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* (Health Canada, March 23, 2020). Subject to the laws and regulations of the province in which the pharmacist is entitled to practice, this exemption will authorizes pharmacists to:



- Prescribe, sell, or provide controlled substances in limited circumstances,
- Transfer prescriptions for controlled substances.

In Ontario, a pharmacy owner or designated manager should determine the most appropriate process, considering the particulars of the medication with respect to security and storage and articulate this process to the pharmacy team.

- *It is advisable for pharmacy staff to speak with patients in self-isolation in advance of delivery and to arrange for an appropriate protocol.*
- *A signature for receipt upon delivery will not be practical due to patient self-isolation. Therefore, documentation of the reason for lack of a signature will be required on the delivery log and prescription record (e.g., “Signature not received upon delivery due to patient self-isolation for COVID-19”).*
- *Upon delivery and depositing the medication at the door, the delivery driver should call the patient immediately to advise them to immediately retrieve the medication. This is particularly important for medications that are temperature-sensitive or **for narcotic/controlled substances**. (OPA, 2020, p. 7-8)*

See Ontario Pharmacy Association’s [COVID-19: A Pharmacist’s Guide to Pandemic Preparedness](#) for further details.

Recommendations for Patients and Clients

- Patients and clients should be advised to practice good hand hygiene (e.g., frequent hand washing, alcohol-based hand sanitizer) and respiratory etiquette (e.g., sneezing into a bent elbow or disposable tissue).
- Patients and clients should be advised to practice social distancing as much as possible and maintain a distance of 2 meters from other people.
- Patients and clients should be advised of virtual recovery options. Social connectedness is a key part of recovery from substance use for many people. Twelve step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous have physical meetings that people are encouraged to attend in person. Now that people are practicing social distancing and self-quarantining, to limit the spread of COVID-19, virtual resources are essential.
 - [Alcoholics Anonymous](#): Offers online support
 - [Big White Wall](#), a 24/7 anonymous online education and discussion platform for mental health support.
 - [Bouncebackontario.ca](#) a guided self-help program using workbooks, with phone coaching support, or ask your primary care provider for a referral.
 - [Narcotics Anonymous](#): Offers a variety of online and skype meeting options
 - [SAMSHA’s Virtual Recovery Resources](#) factsheet.
 - [Self-Help Resources for Managing Chronic Pain and Mental Health](#) – MacHealth

Additional Community Resources for Substance Use



- **Erie St Clair Clinic - Rapid Access Addiction Medicine (RAAM)** Clinic provides fast access to treatment for individuals with opioid or alcohol dependence. The program provides assessment and medical treatment using approved drug therapies, along with other services and referrals.
519-977-9772 -Windsor / 519-326-7742 –Leamington
- **House of Sophrosyne** offers a continuum of programs and services at no cost for individuals with substance use disorder. Virtual treatment and support groups available.
12 Hour Crisis Telephone Line (Monday to Sunday): 519-252-2711 X 100
- **Withdrawal Management Services (WMS) and Community Withdrawal Management Services**
Hotel-Dieu Grace Healthcare Residential or community based, non-medical services for individuals who are intoxicated and in crisis. Individuals can admit themselves into the detoxification unit where they can safely withdraw. Call to ensure bed availability. **519-257-5225**
- **Windsor Addiction Assessment and Outpatient Service (WAAOS) Assessment and Referral Program**
Designated assessment and referral centre in Windsor-Essex for persons wishing to access treatment for addiction to alcohol and/or drugs. Helps individuals determine appropriate treatment options.
519-257-5220 ext. 1
- **The Community Crisis Centre**: Offers walk-in crisis services and a 24/Hour Crisis Line – **519-973-4435**

In Ontario there are a number of guidance documents related to COVID-19, that have been prepared for those that work in different capacities in the health sector. Information changes rapidly, but current guidance can be found on the Ministry of Health’s website: www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/2019_guidance.aspx

Key References:

- Health Canada. (March 23, 2020). *Frequently Asked Questions: subsection 56(1) Class Exemption for Patients, Practitioners and Pharmacists Prescribing and Providing Controlled Substances in Canada during the Coronavirus Pandemic*. Retrieved from <https://www.cpso.on.ca/admin/CPSO/media/Documents/physician/your-practice/physician-advisory-services/health-canada-faqs-class-exemption.pdf>
- National Institute for Drug Abuse (March 23, 2020). *COVID-19: Potential Implications for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders*. Retrieved from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/03/covid-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders>
- Ontario Pharmacy Associations (March 17, 2020). *COVID-19 Pandemic A Pharmacist’s Guide to Pandemic Preparedness*. Retrieved from https://www.opatoday.com/Media/Default/Default/2020-03-17%20OPA%20GUIDE%20FOR%20PANDEMIC%20PREPAREDNESS_FINAL.pdf
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMSHA) (March 20, 2020). *Considerations for the care and treatment of mental and substance use disorders in the covid-19 epidemic*. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/considerations-care-treatment-mental-substance-use-disorders-covid19.pdf>