

US records most overdose deaths in one year — and pandemic's partly to blame, CDC says

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While the country has scrambled to address the coronavirus pandemic by shuttering businesses and limiting gatherings, people with substance abuse disorders have experienced unintended consequences.

More than 81,000 people died by overdose in the U.S. between June 1, 2019, and May 31, 2020, a new report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

That's the highest number of American overdose deaths ever recorded in a year.

While overdose deaths were already seeing spikes before COVID-19 took over, officials say "the latest numbers suggest an acceleration of overdose deaths during the pandemic," the agency said.

"The disruption to daily life due to the COVID-19 [pandemic has hit those with substance use disorder hard](#)," CDC Director Robert Redfield said in a Thursday news release. "As we continue the fight to end this pandemic, it's important to not lose sight of different groups being affected in other ways. We need to take care of people suffering from unintended consequences."

Synthetic opioids, mostly illegally made fentanyl, was the primary driver of the upticks in overdose deaths, the report found. Use of the drug increased about 38% "from the 12-month period leading up to June 2019 compared with the 12-month period leading up to May 2020."

Out of 38 jurisdictions that provide synthetic opioid data, 37 of them reported increases in opioid-related overdose deaths, according to the report, while 18 of them unveiled spikes greater than 50%.

Data also showed that 10 western states saw about a 98% increase in opioid-involved deaths.

Fentanyl in a health care setting is typically used to treat severe or chronic pain, but the medicine is often [illegally sold as powders, eye drops, nasal sprays or pills](#), according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

The drug can make people feel extreme happiness, drowsiness, nausea and confusion, but when abused, it can cause breathing to slow or stop. This lowers the amount of oxygen in the brain, causing a condition called hypoxia that can lead to permanent brain damage, a coma or death.

Cocaine-related overdose deaths also jumped by about 27%, the report said, likely because of "co-use or contamination with illicitly manufactured fentanyl or heroin."

Overdose deaths by psychostimulants, such as methamphetamine, rose by about 35%.

Other substances have also been abused during the pandemic.

A survey of 2,000 American adults conducted in March found that the longer people spent time lodged in their homes during lockdowns, the more they consumed alcohol — with about a [third of respondents admitting to binge drinking](#), McClatchy News reported.

Among the binge drinkers, the odds of consuming heavy amounts of alcohol jumped an extra 19% for every week of lockdown.

The CDC said it's important to expand awareness about substance abuse disorders and availability of treatment.

“Not all overdoses have to end in death,” the agency said. “Everyone has a role to play.”