



## UNFORESEEN IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON DRUG USERS – A REVIEW

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**ABSTRACT** The COVID -19 pandemic has taken over the year 2020 and has impacted the lives of many irrespective of status and socio-economic stability. Many businesses saw a downfall and many went into the dark. Among all those people who suffered the impact of the pandemic were the drug users. The drug users were affected as the pandemic took over the health systems burdening them and faced with the inability to access the drugs due to the mitigation measures imposed by the governments. This paper is a review of how the pandemic had an impact and took a toll on the drug users and how they succumbed to being unable to get the drugs and the inability to avail health services during the pandemic.

**KEYWORDS :** COVID -19, Drug Users, Drug Trafficking, Health Systems, Lockdown Measures, Pandemic

**INTRODUCTION**

COVID -19 is the word that is still haunting us from the beginning of the year 2020. This was an unexpected shock that came upon everyone in the least expected time. The countries were not prepared to face the pandemic and measures were being taken to control and contain the spread of the virus. In the initial months of 2020, several restrictions were put in place by the governments of each country to face the pandemic which led to the enforcement of measures like strict lockdowns, closure of borders and sealing the point of entry. On one hand, the governments were addressing the people on how to prevent the spread of the virus and on the other hand, many other problems were arising such as mental health issues, anxiety, stigma and many more. One among those affected during these unprecedented times were the drug users.

Worldwide around 269 million people used drugs as of 2018 and over 35 million people suffer from drug use disorders according to the World Drug Report released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) <sup>[1]</sup>. The drug users are among those groups who are vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Impact Of COVID-19 On People With Substance Use Disorder Or Drug Users****Impact Due To Closure Of Points Of Entry**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many measures have been taken nationally and internationally to tackle the ongoing public health threat. Strict restrictions were imposed at the points of entry to control the propagation of the virus has directly impacted the trafficking routes of many usual illicit drugs. Heroin, which is most commonly trafficked by land has been impacted to a varying extent due to closure and strict restrictions at the borders. However, the trade of synthetic drugs that are mostly trafficked through the air has been impacted the highest due to the almost universal air traffic restriction <sup>[2]</sup>. This has severely affected the supply of commonly available classic drugs in many regions creating a scarcity. The emergence of such situations can negatively influence the pattern of abuse among substance or drug users.

Drug users might be inclined towards more readily available substances like sedatives, misuse of prescription and over the counter drugs like gabapentinoids, Z-drugs, loperamide, dextromethorphan, benzydamine, promethazine, etc. <sup>[3]</sup> and newer psychoactive substances <sup>[2,4,5]</sup>. They may also be prone to high-risk behaviors such as chemsex <sup>[6]</sup>, sharing of needles, violence and roving outdoors in search of drugs, increasing the risk of acquiring blood-borne infections, like HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C and COVID-19 itself. Furthermore, they may indulge in illegal activities including production or manufacturing of illicit drugs, buying drugs from illegal local and online markets, or through social media applications <sup>[7]</sup>.

**Impact Due To Lockdown**

Another large-scale measure was undertaken by countries to slow COVID-19 transmission was the imposing of lockdowns. It included measures such as physical distancing and movement restrictions to limit contact among people. However, measures like this can have a

serious negative impact on socio-economic life as well as the mental health of individuals, societies and communities as a whole <sup>[8]</sup>. Factors such as unemployment, economic uncertainty, reduced access to family and friends can cause psychological problems like stress, anxiety, loneliness, depression, negative emotional spiral, desperation, panic and fear among the population <sup>[9,10]</sup>. These problems disproportionately affect the disadvantaged and vulnerable section of the society including substance abusers.

Drug users may experience higher cravings, relapse and develop addictions to other substances as one of the major factors associated with these conditions is stress. Many preclinical models have illustrated an enhancement in the rewarding effect of drugs, after exposure to stress <sup>[11,12]</sup>. Similarly, drug addicts have reported that the use of drugs can reduce their negative emotions and provide a short term relief from low mood and fatigue caused by depression <sup>[13]</sup>. This evidence suggests an increase in substance abuse during the lockdown.

This can subject the already at-risk substance users to serious health consequences. Overuse of stimulants like cocaine and methamphetamines can lead to coronary heart disease, arrhythmia and overstimulation of the heart and nervous system leading to seizures, strokes, or heart attacks <sup>[14]</sup>. Drugs abused in the form of smoke or inhalation can damage the respiratory system making them vulnerable to chronic respiratory infections and upper respiratory or oral cancer. Evidence also suggests that long-term and overuse of drugs is linked with mental illnesses like depression, schizophrenia, etc. further deteriorating their conditions.

Apart from impacting current drug users, the above-mentioned psychological problems are highly associated with the development of addiction in individuals. Therefore, a rise in the number of drug users can be expected during the lockdown. This can create a burden on the already overburdened health system during and even after the lockdown.

**Impact Due To The Burden On The Health System**

Health systems around the world were burdened by patients even before the pandemic. Lower- and middle-income countries (LMIC) are mostly overwhelmed by patients suffering from infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, etc. <sup>[15]</sup>. Even the developed countries face a burden of non-communicable diseases. Although the developed countries have more expertise in managing COVID-19 patients, the sheer number of patients has overloaded the healthcare system both in developed and LMICs <sup>[16]</sup>.

Even the healthcare workers, who are an important resource, have been adversely affected. The Centre for Disease Control and the World Health Organization reported that more than 35,000 health workers were infected by COVID-19 with around 200 fatalities in April 2020 itself <sup>[17]</sup>. These numbers are most likely to increase as the pandemic has continued. They also suffer from social, economic and psychological issues deteriorating their health and the overall healthcare resources.

This has compelled the health systems to divert these deficient resources towards the treatment of COVID-19. Due to this

reallocation, there has been a shortage of staff in outpatient centers and drug treatment centers. Services of opioid substitution therapy (OST), which is an evidence-based effective treatment for drug users, could not operate and faced threats of suspension. For example; on average 3 out of 10 deserving patients were deprived of treatment in deaddiction centers in East and North-East states of India<sup>[18,19]</sup>. Barriers due to lockdown and movement restrictions also resulted in the exhaustion of stocks of substitutes and medications available for drug users<sup>[20]</sup>.

Due to these limitations in the health care system, the number of drug users seeking treatment is likely to reduce. The disruption of these services coupled with the psychological impacts of the pandemic, possesses a potential risk of relapse among individuals who were already seeking treatment, adverse effects due to withdrawal and deaths due to overdose<sup>[19]</sup>. New users may not be able to seek treatment at an early stage leading to the development of dependence and tolerance. In the long run, patients who were enrolled in OST services might drop out increasing the burden of drug abuse disorder.

## DISCUSSION

Various measures taken against the COVID-19 pandemic have had some direct or indirect effect on the supply, consumption and help-seeking behavior of drugs and drug users. These measures might compel drug users to seek alternative and newer substances, involve in high-risk behaviors and illegal activities, or drop out of substitution therapies and other treatment services that they were part of. We should be prepared with policies and interventions to prioritize the needs of these vulnerable communities who will be hit hard by the effect of a pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

These are difficult times for everyone, especially for vulnerable populations like the drug users. The world might also see a rise in the number of drug abusers and by the end of this pandemic, we might face drug epidemics throughout the world. We need to prioritize these groups and bring in interventions and be prepared to aid them during these unprecedented times.

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