

Drug Misuse in America 2021: Physician Perspectives and Diagnostic Insights on the Drug Crisis and COVID-19

This [Health Trends[®] report](#) provides insights and perspectives about the use of controlled substance medications and illicit drugs in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report combines insights from a Harris Poll survey of over 500 US primary care physicians with analysis from a database of millions of deidentified aggregated clinical drug monitoring tests by Quest Diagnostics to provide a unique snapshot of physician perspectives and analysis on drug misuse.

More than 96,779 people died from drug overdoses in the United States

between March 2020 and March 2021, largely fueled by illicit fentanyl—roughly a 30% rise from the previous 12-month period and the highest number to date, according to provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

CDC Reports Record High 12-Month Drug Overdose Toll

Top 5 key findings



1. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the drug crisis and physicians anticipate a continuing rise in overdose deaths



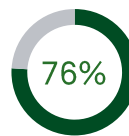
67% of physicians worry that they have missed signs of drug misuse and use disorders among one or more of their patients during the pandemic



94% of primary care physicians report seeing more patients experiencing stress, anxiety, or other mental health issues because of the pandemic and fear a correlation between rising mental health issues and prescription drug misuse



98% of physicians say they are concerned about misuse of controlled substances in general compared to 75% saying the same for opioids



76% of physicians expect deaths from drug overdose will continue to rise even as the pandemic subsides



2. Physicians worry they have missed signs of drug misuse and use disorders during the pandemic and express concerns about telehealth



75% of physicians believe telehealth visits limit the ability to determine whether patients are at risk for or are already misusing prescription drugs



91% of physicians feel confident they can recognize the signs of prescription drug misuse during in-office interactions with patients, while only 50% report the same confidence via telehealth visits



3. Physicians are prescribing more gabapentin than opioids for chronic pain and worry patients will turn to illicit fentanyl



87% of physicians said they prescribed gabapentin for chronic pain in the past 6 months, far more than the two-thirds who prescribed opioids (65%), likely reflecting concerns about potential opioid misuse



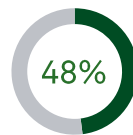
78% of physicians fear patients will turn to illicit fentanyl if they cannot get a prescription medication and 86% worry that illicit fentanyl will claim more lives than prescribed opioids



4. Despite physician confidence in counseling patients, nearly half of tested patients show drug misuse



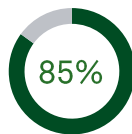
88% of physicians report feeling confident they can identify patients at risk for drug use and misuse



48% of patients tested in 2020 show signs of drug misuse and half (49.9%) of these show signs of drug combining, a particularly dangerous form of misuse



5. Clinical drug testing is deemed critical, but clearer guidelines would help optimize its use



85% of physicians report that such testing gives them confidence they are prescribing safely



88% of physicians believe that better guidelines would help ensure that clinical drug testing is used equitably



51% of physicians do not follow up positive presumptive tests with definitive tests—a potential concern as presumptive point of care tests may miss fentanyl, the drug responsible for most overdose deaths, in a substantial number (74%) of specimens

Gudin, J, Kain, J, Edinboro, L, Hillborne, L. Presumptive Versus Definitive Drug Testing: What are We Missing, PAINWeek Conference 2021, Las Vegas, NV.

“Physicians overwhelmingly value clinical drug testing. Clearer clinical guidelines will help them to optimize this tool to improve care and potentially save lives.”

Dr. Jeffrey Gudin, M.D.
Senior Medical Advisor
Drug Monitoring
Quest Diagnostics

About Quest Diagnostics Health Trends®

Quest Diagnostics Health Trends® is a series of scientific reports that provide insights into health topics, based on analysis of objective clinical laboratory data, to empower better patient care, population health management and public health policy. The reports are based on the Quest Diagnostics database of approximately 60 billion de-identified laboratory test results, believed to be the largest of its kind in healthcare.

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