

Substance Use in Maine: Increased Concerns with COVID-19 Impacts

Public Health Concerns of Youth & Adult Substance Use in Maine

- **Alcohol is the most widely available and consumed substance in Maine.**
 - 6 in 10 high school students believe alcohol would be easy to get.
 - 33% of 18-24 year olds report binge drinking in the past month.
 - Maine's adult excessive drinking rate is higher than the national average (19.9% vs. 18.6%).
- **Marijuana access and social acceptance has increased** with medical and retail marijuana.
- **Perceptions of harm of marijuana have declined** in recent years among both youth and adults.
 - 1 in 5 high school students have used marijuana in the past month.
 - First time use among adults 26 and older more than doubled from 2016-17 to 2017-18.
- Nearly 18% of Maine adults smoke cigarettes and 30% of high school students use tobacco products, including e-cigarettes.
- Maine is one of the **top 10 states for the highest rates of opioid-related overdose deaths.**

COVID-19 Has Exacerbated Substance Use in Maine

During **times of stress, people often turn to substances as a coping mechanism.** This has been particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased stress and social isolation, both risk factors for substance use.

- **Younger adults, people of color, essential workers & unpaid adult caregivers** report disproportionately worse mental health outcomes, increased substance use and thoughts of suicide.
- Social distancing measures have made it more difficult for people with substance use disorders to access treatment, **increasing use rates** and impacting sobriety.
- **Policy changes at the state level to enable to-go cocktails and alcohol delivery to support businesses and restaurants during the pandemic have increased availability of alcohol and have led to increases in alcohol use normalization and availability.**
- **Increases in substance use availability, normalize use among youth, with studies showing earlier initiation of use is correlated with addiction later in life.**

COVID-19 Has Exacerbated Substance Use in Maine

- Total **alcohol sales outside of bars and restaurants increased by 24%** during the pandemic nationwide.
- Agent spirit sales (hard liquor) in Maine increased by 10% from 2019 to 2020 and by 33% since 2016.
- Nationally, one study reports **32% of adult participants binge drank during stay-at-home orders**, with 60% of those indicating they had increased their consumption during the pandemic.
- **In April 2020, crashes related to impaired driving in Maine peaked at 6.2% compared to 4.4% in April 2019.** Rates of impaired driving crashes remained consistently higher in 2020.
- Nationally, **marijuana use rates have increased.**
- Marijuana use has been demonstrated to worsen clinical outcomes related to COVID-19. Intense emotional and behavioral reactions were reported during the pandemic such as fear, boredom, loneliness, anxiety, insomnia, anger and aggression.
- Maine's **drug overdose rates have increased** with 502 fatal overdoses in 2020, an increase from the previous high in 2017 of 417.

What Can Legislators Do to Reduce Substance Misuse?

The actions below are **evidence-based strategies** policymakers can prioritize to support existing efforts to prevent youth substance use and adult misuse in Maine.

In response to COVID-19:

- Reduce youth access and adult overconsumption by **opposing bills that allow alcohol and marijuana delivery to homes.**
- Continue to **provide health insurance coverage for behavioral health and substance use disorder treatment** programs and telehealth options.

To address substance use that has persisted in Maine:

- **Increase alcohol and marijuana taxes and dedicate the revenue to public health prevention efforts** to discourage underage and high-risk use.
- **Provide sustainable and consistent funding for substance use prevention efforts**, including youth development and community engagement activities that encourage healthy behaviors.
- **Support harm reduction initiatives**, such as naloxone distribution or syringe exchanges.
- **Ensure public health data collection, monitoring and evaluations are routinely conducted** to accurately track substance use rates over time.

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The **Maine Public Health Association** is the state's oldest, largest, and most diverse association for public health professionals. As a statewide nonprofit, we advocate, act, and advise on critical public health challenges, aiming to improve the policies, systems, and environments that underlie health inequities – but which also have potential to improve health outcomes for all people in Maine. Learn more at: www.mainepublichealth.org.