

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Safe Glen Cove Coalition: COVID-19- Potential Implications for Individuals With Substance Use Disorders

A recent article published by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) discusses the potential impact of the virus on individuals struggling with a substance use disorder. Because it attacks the lungs, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 could be an especially serious threat to those who smoke tobacco or marijuana or who vape. People with opioid use disorder (OUD) and methamphetamine use disorder may also be vulnerable due to those drugs' effects on respiratory and pulmonary health. Additionally, individuals with a substance use disorder are more likely to experience homelessness or incarceration than those in the general population, and these circumstances pose unique challenges regarding transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19. NIDA maintains all these possibilities should be a focus of active researchers who are working to understand this emerging health threat.

SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 is believed to have jumped species from other mammals (likely bats) to first infect humans in Wuhan, capital of China's Hubei province, in late 2019. It attacks the respiratory tract and appears to have a higher fatality rate than seasonal influenza. The exact fatality rate is still unknown, since it depends on the number of undiagnosed and asymptomatic cases, and further analyses are needed to determine those figures. Thus far, deaths and serious illness from COVID-19 seem concentrated among those who are older and who have underlying health issues, such as diabetes, cancer, and respiratory conditions. It is therefore reasonable to be concerned that compromised lung function or lung disease related to smoking history, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), could put people at risk for serious complications of COVID-19.

Vaping, like smoking, may also harm lung health. Whether it can lead to COPD is still unknown, but emerging evidence suggests that exposure to aerosols from e-cigarettes harms the cells of

the lung and diminishes the ability to respond to infection. In one NIH-supported study, for instance, influenza virus-infected mice exposed to these aerosols had enhanced tissue damage and inflammation.

People who use opioids at high doses medically or who have OUD face separate challenges to their respiratory health. Since opioids act in the brainstem to slow breathing, their use not only puts the user at risk of life-threatening or fatal overdose, it may also cause a harmful decrease in oxygen in the blood (hypoxemia). Lack of oxygen can be especially damaging to the brain; while brain cells can withstand short periods of low oxygen, they can suffer damage when this state persists. Chronic respiratory disease is already known to increase overdose mortality risk among people taking opioids, and thus diminished lung capacity from COVID-19 could similarly endanger this population.

Other risks for people with substance use disorders include decreased access to health care, housing insecurity, and greater likelihood for incarceration. Limited access to health care places people with addiction at greater risk for many illnesses, but if hospitals and clinics are pushed to their capacity, it could be that people with addiction—who are already stigmatized and underserved by the healthcare system—will experience even greater barriers to treatment for COVID-19. Homelessness or incarceration can expose people to environments where they are in close contact with others who might also be at higher risk for infections. The prospect of self-quarantine and other public health measures may also disrupt access to syringe services, medications, and other support needed by people with OUD.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) is a United States federal-government research institute whose mission is to "lead the Nation in bringing the power of science to bear on drug abuse and addiction". For more information please visit www.drugabuse.gov.

SAFE, Inc. is the only alcohol and substance abuse prevention, intervention and education agency in the City of Glen Cove. It's Coalition is conducting an opioid prevention awareness campaign entitled, "Keeping Glen Cove SAFE," in order to educate and update the community regarding opioid use and its consequences. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about the Opioid Epidemic at www.safeglencove.org.