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# Syracuse overdose deaths rise 15%: ‘People don’t know what drugs they are using anymore’

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Paramedics remove a patient from the 12th floor of the Skyline apartment complex in Syracuse April 2 following a drug overdose. Patrick Lohmann | Syracuse.com Patrick Lohmann | Syracuse.com

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Syracuse, N.Y. – As Covid-19 subsides in Onondaga County, the opioid overdose epidemic is getting worse.

The county reported 47 opioid deaths in the first quarter of 2021, up from 41 in the first three months of 2020. The latest numbers from the Onondaga County Medical Examiner's Office were posted on the county health department's [website](#).

Fentanyl alone or mixed with heroin and other drugs was involved in 45 of the 47 deaths in Onondaga County.

Fentanyl is 80 to 100 times stronger than morphine. A 2-milligram dose can be deadly, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The 15% increase in opioid deaths comes on the heels of a record-breaking number of overdose deaths locally and nationally in 2021.

There were [156 opioid deaths in Onondaga last year](#), up from 127 in 2019, a 23% increase. Drug overdose deaths nationally rose nearly 30% in 2020 to a record 93,000, according to [preliminary numbers](#) the government reported last week.

Opioids include street drugs like heroin, prescription painkillers such as Oxycodone and the highly potent synthetic drug Fentanyl.

Experts say Covid-19 made the epidemic worse. Pandemic-related job losses, anxiety, social isolation and disrupted access to addiction treatment services fueled the rise in drug abuse and overdoses.

The pandemic also disrupted the supply of illicit drugs, prompting dealers and manufacturers to improvise, said Dr. Tolani Ajagbe, medical director of addiction treatment services at Crouse Hospital.

Dealers are mixing fentanyl and other dangerous drugs with heroin, cocaine, MDMA (also known as "Molly" or "Ecstasy"), methamphetamine and benzodiazepine drugs like Xanax.

"A lot of people we see don't even know what drugs they are using anymore," Ajagbe said.



Dr. Tolani Ajagbe is medical director of addiction treatment services and chief of psychiatry at Crouse Health, in Syracuse.

[Xylazine](#), a tranquilizer commonly used in horses, was recently detected in three people who died of overdoses in Oneida County. It is a sedative and muscle relaxant.

“The substances people are using are much more dangerous than they were pre-pandemic,” Ajagbe said. In addition to overdoses, the drugs can cause heart attacks and strokes, he said.

Tolani expects the overdose epidemic to get worse because people are “self-medicating” to deal with lingering pandemic-related anxiety and stress.

He advises people struggling with addiction to [seek treatment](#). Crouse and some other addiction treatment programs in the Syracuse area offer same day treatment, he said.

To prevent opioid overdose deaths, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends:

- Calling 911 if you witness an overdose.
- People who use drugs and their loved ones should have naloxone, also known as Narcan, and use it in the event of an overdose. Naloxone is an opioid overdose reversal drug that can save lives. Multiple doses may be needed in overdose cases involving fentanyl.
- People should not use drugs when they are alone.