

Covid 19 Newsletter for Drugs and Alcohol Services

May 2020

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MESSAGE FROM CATHERINE BYRNE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR THE NATIONAL DRUGS STRATEGY

Over the past three months, Covid-19 has brought huge challenges, sickness and tragic loss of life. Our health service has responded swiftly to this pandemic. Healthcare staff and volunteers are doing immense work to stem the spread of this virus and protect public health.

I am acutely aware of the heightened risk for vulnerable people in our communities, including people who use drugs and people who are homeless. I know that you and your colleagues working in drug and alcohol services have been working tirelessly on the front line, making sure that these people are not forgotten and have access to safe and appropriate accommodation and the healthcare supports they need. The work you are doing is hugely important and greatly valued.

I want to sincerely thank you for your resilience, dedication and compassion during such difficult times. I want to commend the drug and alcohol task forces and local service providers, for coming together to ensure that drug and alcohol services can continue to support service users.

We know that addiction does not disappear at times like this, in fact in some cases it becomes more acute, and problem drug and alcohol use can increase. This can have a serious knock-on effect on families and levels of domestic abuse and drug-related intimidation. You are responding to these challenges and providing a lifeline for those who are at greatest risk and in most need.

Working in partnership with the HSE you are delivering vital information and advice around COVID-19 to people who use drugs, helping to reduce harm, prevent overdose, and improve access to OST. I acknowledge the increased pressure this puts on your organisation and I have asked my officials to examine how we can further support you in adapting to this challenging environment.

Thank you for being on call for Ireland during this unprecedented time. As you continue in your work, please take care of your own physical and mental health. Supports are available if you need them. We are in this together and we will get through it.

Drugs Services Available During Covid-19

Drug services have adapted to continue to provide services to clients during Covid-19. Drugs.ie has compiled a comprehensive [online list of available drug services](#) . Thanks to everyone who provided details.

Harm Reduction Advice for People with Alcohol Related Problems

The Department of Health and the HSE have produced a poster to provide advice on reducing harm for people dependent on alcohol or in treatment during Covid-19. The poster contains several key messages aimed at reducing the harms associated with alcohol and providing advice and supports for recovery. It complements the poster on harm reduction for people

who use drugs.

Coronavirus COVID-19

Advice on reducing harm for people with alcohol related problems

Alcohol weakens your defence against viruses.

- If you are thinking about cutting down or stopping alcohol, contact your GP for advice. This is so you can cut back safely and avoid withdrawal symptoms.
- Stay in touch with alcohol services and your own personal and trusted recovery network. Several support groups like AA, SMART Recovery and Life Ring are available online.
- Keep a record of how much you are drinking. If you can, allow at least 2-3 alcohol free days per week to give your liver a rest.
- Little things can help your mental health. Create a routine by getting up, staying active and eating at regular times.
- Don't stockpile alcohol - you may drink more.
- Stay indoors as much as possible and limit your contact with people not in your household. Keep at least 2 metres (6 feet) away from other people if you go outside.
- Don't mix alcohol with other drugs or medicines.
- Follow the general advice about washing your hands. Clean surfaces and glasses or bottles before and after you drink.
- Be aware of how your drinking behaviour may be affecting others. Try to avoid drinking until children have gone to bed.
- If you have a high temperature, breathing difficulties, shortness of breath or a cough, phone your GP and self-isolate.

Visit [HSE.ie](#) for updated factual information and advice on COVID-19
Visit [drugs.ie](#) for information on drug and alcohol services available during COVID-19
Call the HSE Drug and Alcohol Helpline on 1800 459 459 or email helpline@hse.ie
Visit [askaboutalcohol.ie](#) for alcohol information and tools to assess your drinking

Protection from coronavirus.
It's in our hands.

Covid-19 poses additional risks to people with alcohol related problems who are particularly vulnerable to its impact. It is known that alcohol weakens the immune system. The key messages are not to stockpile alcohol, to have a few alcohol-free days per week and not to mix alcohol with drugs or other medicines and to stay safe. Supports for those with alcohol related problems continue to be available at **drugs.ie**, **askaboutalcohol.ie** and the HSE drug and alcohol helpline on 1800 459 459.

Task Forces are requested to bring the poster to the attention of their networks of community and voluntary organisations and interested parties in their areas. Click here to download the [alcohol harm reduction poster](#) .

Covid-19 Guidance for Addiction Services

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought with it an urgent need to adapt to new ways of delivering addiction services to ensure that service users continue to receive the help they need. One issue is the use of the telephone and video links for remote consultations with clients. Numerous issues have arisen, along with what is often people's first experience of working remotely. To assist frontline staff, the HSE has produced 'ways of working': guidance on remote consultations for addiction services. To access this and other guidance for addiction services, click <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/primarycare/socialinclusion/other-areas/health-inequalities/guidance-documents-and-resources-addiction.html>

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence and sexual violence can have devastating effects for the victim as well as for society as a whole. In response to the Covid19 pandemic and in an attempt to protect society from the effects of the virus, we have all been asked to stay at home. However, for those who experience domestic abuse, home may not be the safest option. It is important that you know you are not alone – State agencies and the voluntary sector continue to be available to help and support anyone who is a victim of domestic or sexual abuse. Support services have been adapted and increased to ensure they remain available to support you, even during the restrictions which are now in place due to Covid-19. The Government and frontline organisations have launched the **Still Here** campaign to reassure victims of domestic abuse that support is still available despite COVID-19 and to ensure victims are aware of, and can access, services. More information on the campaign is available [here](#)

Rapid Assessment of the Impact of Covid-19 on Drug Users and Services

The Drugs Policy Unit is undertaking a rapid assessment of the impact of Covid-19 on people who use drugs and on service providers. The unit has put together a team with research expertise in drugs services, including experts from the voluntary and community sectors.

The pandemic has increased risks and challenges for people who use drugs and for service providers. Due to the health implications of using drugs, people who do so are more susceptible to the negative effects of the virus. Covid-19 has also created significant obstacles in the provision of drug services throughout the country. Initial reports indicate that a transformative adaptation has taken place regarding the delivery of services. The assessment will document the changes that have taken place and identify the lessons for policy and practice.

The assessment will include an online survey of drug services to capture their experiences from the front line. The survey will be supported by two case studies examining the impact of

Covid-19 in the delivery of drug services. There will also be an engagement with task forces on how their services are being restructured and a consultation with relevant stakeholders. The final report will be presented to the National Oversight Committee and the Minister of State with responsibility for the National Drug Strategy.

Gender and Drug Policy

The Pompidou Group is the Council of Europe's drug policy cooperation platform, with representation from 39 member states, including Ireland. Recently, the Pompidou Group established a working group to complete a handbook on implementing a gender approach in different drug policy areas. The finished handbook will put forward a set of principles and practical examples that provide concrete guidance for implementing a gender approach in various areas. Guidance will also be provided for law enforcement agencies on the practical integration of gender approaches in their areas of responsibility.

The Irish representative on the working group is Dr Sarah Morton from UCD. Dr Morton along with colleagues have compiled a report on gender and Irish drug policy. The report responds to key questions set to the working group on drug policy in Ireland, including;

- Gender within current drug policy;
- Transgender and/or intersex persons within service delivery;
- Stakeholders at national level;
- Obstacles to the integration of a gender sensitive approach; and
- The benefits to society, and the health and well-being of target groups, to be derived from adapting and implementing a gender sensitive approach.

The paper can be found on the UCD Repository [here](#)

Dual Diagnosis Risk During Covid-19

The relationship between substance use and mental health is complex and can mean additional difficulties for both the person and their families. These issues may be worsened by external stresses during periods of crisis, making the COVID-19 pandemic an even more difficult time. More information on the risks for people with dual diagnosis and how they can mind their mental health and stay safe during Covid-19 is available here:

http://www.drugs.ie/resources/covid/dual_diagnosis/dual_diagnosis_minding_your_mental_health_and_staying_safe_during_covid_19/

Besides those affected by dual diagnosis, people in general can face mental health issues during the Covid-10 pandemic. Read [here](#) for advice and supports for people affected by mental health.

Overdose Awareness

As Covid-19 is a new virus, we continue to learn about the impact it can have on people who use drugs. One effect is a higher risk of overdose due to breathing difficulties associated with Covid-19. This risk can be exacerbated by using a drug such as heroin which can cause

respiratory depression. Changing the type of drug, using new drugs or mixing drugs can also increase the risk. Regrettably, we have had reports of deaths due to drug overdose. The HSE has provided information on drug overdose awareness, including a [drug overdose awareness poster](#) . In addition, UISCE has a poster on how to respond to a drug overdose, including the use of naloxone. Click here to download the [UISCE overdose response poster](#)

Second Instalment Payment to Drug and Alcohol Task Forces

Task Forces are reminded that the DPU will be sending out the second instalment payment claim forms and associated documentation to drug and alcohol task forces in mid-May.

Covid-19 Webinars for Homeless and Addiction Service Providers

The HSE National Social Inclusion Office and the Department of Housing are co-hosting a series of webinars on Covid-19 for homeless and drug and alcohol service providers. The recent webinar opened with a video message from **Minister Simon Harris** thanking homeless and addiction staff for their collective effort and dedication which has saved the lives of people who use drugs and those experiencing homelessness. The message can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/9uOxPNE1W5U> Click here or more details on the [webinars](#) .

International Perspectives on Drug Use and Drug Services During Covid-19

The European drugs agency (EMCDDA) has produced a briefing on the specific risks that are people who use drugs face during the Covid-19 pandemic, the services they need and how service providers can adapt on the frontline. This and other resources for service providers are available at [EMCDDA](#)

“We have seen huge partnership work with statutory services and the community and voluntary services all around the country. An early focus in our preparation was to clear people from the OST waiting list and to ensure new people who wanted treatment were able to access that despite the travel and service restrictions” (Nicola Corrigan, HSE).

Read more about the Irish and international policy responses to drug and alcohol addiction here

<https://www.iimhl.com/files/docs/IIMHL-Updates/20200502.pdf>

European Web Survey on Changes in Drug Use Patterns due to Covid-19



The European drugs agency (EMCDDA) is carrying out a Mini European Web Survey on Drugs: Covid-19 in order to investigate and rapidly document the impact of the epidemic and national responses on changes in patterns of drug use, harms and service provision. Understanding and sharing information on the consequences of Covid-19 can help services to improve their responses. Data from the survey can be disaggregated for Ireland. Click here to participate in the

[European Web Survey on Drugs: Covid-19](#)