



Get the facts about
**COVID-19 and
substance use**

A Publication of the Drug Control Secretariat
April 2020



Author:

Dave Alexander, Drug Control Officer, Drug Control Secretariat

Edited:

Elizabeth Japal, Assistant Drug Avoidance Officer

Published by:

Drug Control Secretariat
Ministry of Education, Human Resource Development and Religious Affairs
Botanical Gardens
Tanteen
St. George's
Grenada
Telephone: 1-473-440-7911
E-mail: drugcontrol@moe.gov.com

Website: <https://www.mgovernance.net/moe/national-council-drug-control>

April 2020

Data from this publication may be reproduced with acknowledgement from source.

Reference as:

Get the facts about COVID-19 and substance abuse

Designed by the Drug Control Secretariat

Get the Facts About COVID-19 and Substance Use

Introduction:

The coronavirus is a new virus. At this time, scientists, epidemiologists and other medical professionals, know very little about the interaction between illicit/recreational substance use¹ and the coronavirus; no studies have been conducted as yet on this relationship. This poses unknown issues and what may be the potential for greater harm.

Undoubtedly, both substance use and covid-19 are harmful and can cause many health-related problems; both can result in long-term medical problems and can be fatal.

People who use drugs (PWUD), sometimes referred to as drug users, face the same risks as the general population and therefore, need to be aware of the appropriate advice to prevent or reduce their risk of infection. The following are some questions being asked about substance use and its linkages with COVID-19, and appropriate responses. Every effort was made to ensure that the responses provided are scientifically accurate, and based on current knowledge. Several scholarly articles were reviewed, for preparation of this document.

This document was prepared as a source of accurate, reliable, timely and relevant information for professionals (law enforcement, medical personnel, educators, social workers), who provide medical, counseling and other related services, to substance users, other professionals, and members of the public.

The information contained herein should be used along with information from other reputable sources such as the Ministry of Health (Grenada), World Health Organization (WHO), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and credible medical journals.

¹ The terms 'substance use', and 'drug use', are used interchangeably in this document.



What is the difference between the coronavirus and COVID-19?



The **novel corona virus (SARS-CoV-2)** is a respiratory virus which spreads primarily through droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or through droplets of saliva. Initially found in secretions of three pneumonia patients in Wuhan China, 2019. It can be detected in respiratory secretions, blood, feces², and urine. It can persist in respiratory secretions for seven (7) to ten (10) days in moderate cases and up to two (2) weeks in severe cases. It can be found in faeces, up to thirty-seven (37) days.

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the novel corona virus. The most common symptoms of the disease are fever, tiredness, and dry cough. Some patients may have aches and pains, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat or diarrhea.



Can I have COVID-19, but not develop symptoms?



A person can have the coronavirus, but not develop any symptoms. That person is referred to as 'asymptomatic laboratory-confirmed case', that is, a person infected with COVID-19 who does not develop symptoms.

Meanwhile, a 'symptomatic COVID-19 case', is a person who has developed signs and symptoms compatible with COVID-19 virus infection.

² There is some evidence that COVID-19 infection may lead to intestinal infection and be present in faeces. However, to date only one study has cultured the COVID-19 virus from a single stool specimen. There have been no reports of faecal-oral transmission of the COVID-19 virus to date (March 29, 2020), according to the World Health Organization.



Is it harmful to share a marijuana cigarette which is being smoked, with my friends?



Recreational drug use often takes place in groups or in crowded settings, thus increasing the risk of exposure to COVID-19. The use of marijuana causes health-related problems. COVID-19 can be spread from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth, and also sharing drugs and drug apparatus.

Sharing of a marijuana cigarette which is being smoked among friends, is also very harmful. Marijuana cigarettes (joint, spliff, roach), when shared among users, can increase the risk of spreading corona virus, if any of the users are contaminated. 'Hand to mouth' contact through smoking of the marijuana cigarettes can increase the risk of transmission of the coronavirus through fluids such as saliva which may be found on the cigarettes. Transmission of the virus among smokers who share their cigarettes is a major health risk.



What effects does smoking, whether tobacco cigarettes or marijuana and COVID-19 have on respiratory system?



The coronavirus that causes COVID-19 could be an especially serious threat to those who smoke tobacco or marijuana or who vape. Smoking and COVID-19 damages the respiratory system, and increase risk of pneumonia. If you smoke drugs, such as crack, cigarettes, or methamphetamine, COVID-19 infection will make it difficult to breathe.



What are some of the harmful consequence of alcohol consumption and COVID-19?



Ethyl alcohol (ethanol) is the substance in alcoholic beverages (beer, wine, spirits), which is responsible for most of the harms which are caused from its consumption.

The use of alcoholic beverages as a stress reliever for recreational purposes during this period of COVID-19, or any other period, is not a wise choice. Scientific evidence suggests that there is no 'safe limit' for consumption of alcohol. The risk of damage to your health increases with each drink of alcohol consumed. Alcohol weakens the immune system and make you more susceptible to pneumonia, COVID-19 and other diseases.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), consumption of alcohol will not protect you from COVID-19, or prevent you from being infected by it; neither should it be used as a means of preventing or treating COVID-19. Further, the WHO has stated that the consumption of alcohol will not kill the virus in the inhaled air; it will not disinfect your mouth and throat.



Should alcohol-based sanitizers be used for hygienic purposes to clean surfaces, equipment, utensils, tools, and body parts such as hands in getting rid of the coronavirus?



Alcohol-based gels are favored by most health organizations and are therefore perceived as being credible as sanitizers, including cleaning equipment, utensils and other r=products to get rid of the coronavirus.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "an alcohol-containing preparation (liquid, gel or foam) is designed for application to the hands to inactivate microorganisms and/or temporarily suppress their growth". Such preparations may contain one or more types of alcohol, and other active ingredients. Alcohol solutions containing at least 60% by volume, are most effective, and can be used in hand sanitizers to kill the virus; however, the WHO has warned that these hand sanitizers have no effect in destroying the coronavirus in one's body, when ingested. Consuming alcohol or alcohol-based sanitizers will not destroy the coronavirus; its consumption is likely to increase the health risks if a person becomes infected with the virus.

Prolonged and repeated use of alcohol as a disinfectant can also cause discoloration, swelling, hardening and cracking of rubber and certain plastics; It is flammable, and it should be used in well-ventilated spaces.



Substance users may be unable to access treatment for medical and other problems associated with their drug use. What are some of the health-related consequences for drug users who may require treatment, but are unable to access treatment?



Drug use and drug dependence do not stop because of COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed in relation to freedom of movement or assembly. Drug users are vulnerable at many levels: drug dependence, stigma, discrimination, criminalization; as well as some may lack safe space.

Due to the restrictions imposed in the Emergency Powers Regulations³, persons who experienced substance use disorders, prior to the restrictions, may encounter even more problems associated with their substance use. As social/physical distancing becomes necessary, due to the growing pandemic of the coronavirus and COVID-19, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and stress can develop among people who use drugs (PWUD). This situation can lead to increased substance use as a coping mechanism. Isolation may also lead to relapses and development of substance use disorders in at-risk individuals.

It should also be noted that drug users may have underlying chronic medical conditions (HIV, viral hepatitis infections, pulmonary diseases, asthma, cardiovascular diseases, liver cancers) which they may or may not be aware of. Risk of disruption in access to medical services can further complicate this situation. Drug users may experience withdrawal symptoms, and may not access medical attention. They may try to manage their dependence at home by themselves without medical supervision. This is risky, and can cause other medical problems which can be fatal.

It should be noted that some early symptoms of drug withdrawal and COVID-19 infection are similar. These include fever and muscle soreness. Therefore, it is possible that persons experiencing withdrawal symptoms, may also be infected with the coronavirus, but may believe that its withdrawal problems they are encountering.

Finally, dual diagnosis can be a major issue for people who have substance use disorders, and the combined pressure of coping with reduced medical services and being confined home can contribute to significant deterioration in their mental health. They may resort to increased drug use, to cope with the pressures. This drug use may become more prevalent and increasingly risky, making people less likely to comply with the current COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines.

Despite the restrictions, health services are available, and family, friends, health professionals, social and community workers should encourage substance users to access treatment services.



What are some of the domestic problems, which can emerge in families during this period of restrictions?



One of the factors which contribute to domestic violence, child abuse, sexual violence and other forms of abuse is the consumption of alcohol. The linkage between alcohol consumption and domestic violence and other forms of violence and abuse is

³Emergency Powers (Covid-19) Proclamation, Statutory Rules and Order (SRO)No. 12 of 2020, imposed a state of emergency in the State of Grenada, on March 25, 2020; Subsequent SRO's and regulations, imposed curfews of varying durations and several restrictions on movement and assembly of persons.

established in several research studies and publications. Some of these situations were presented in the document, 'Statistical Analysis of Incidents of Domestic Violence in Grenada, in which the Consumption of Drugs was Reported, 2012 to 2016', prepared by the Drug Control Secretariat in 2017.

The present construct under the restrictions of movement, curfews and other measures imposed under the current state of emergency, pose significant challenges for many families. Additionally, there may be existing domestic issues, unresolved conflicts, financial challenges, which existed in households prior to the restrictions. These may be further exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic. The 'new normal' is family members being all at home for extended periods; many are not used to this environment.

The Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (NO. 4) Regulations, 2020, which came into force April 20, 2020, states in section 5, sub-section 6, 'There shall be no consumption of alcohol in or in the vicinity of any establishment exempted under subregulation (1) or in any public place'. While this regulation seeks to restrict consumption on premises, particularly supermarkets and grocery shops, there is concern that some persons who use alcohol may resort to doing so when alone at home or in the presence of minors. This can pose some challenges.

Given the above situation, as the stress of the entire phenomenon emerges, some persons may be unable to adequately manage or resolve the prevailing challenges. They may engage in the consumption of drugs as a coping mechanism. This alters their thoughts, judgement, decision-making and behaviour. They may 'lash out' physically and verbally at those around them. The risk, frequency and severity of perpetration of interpersonal violence such as intimate partner violence, sexual violence, violence, abuse of the elderly and persons with special needs, and violence against children may be exhibited.

There exist several institutions, social programs and organizations in Grenada which can be accessed to report these problems and to obtain assistance. These include: Royal Grenada Police Force (Community Relations Department, Special Victims Unit), Ministry of Social development, the Child Protection Authority, Ministry of Education (Student Support Services Unit, Drug Control Secretariat, Special Education Unit), Legal Aid and Counselling Clinic, Grenada Community Development Agency, Association of Social Workers, Conference of Churches, Association of Evangelical Churches, Grenada Seventh Day Adventist Mission, and other faith-based organizations.

Despite the availability of services to provide assistance, some people may not be able to access these services, as some domestic abuse victims are unable to seek the help they need because they cannot escape the situation or the perpetrators of the violence due to the restrictions imposed.

The Drug Control Secretariat does not yet have data on reports of domestic violence, or related issues in Grenada, which may have occurred during the current pandemic. However, it will continue to monitor the situation.



The borders (airports, seaports, land borders, airspace) of many countries are closed. Movement of people is severely restricted. What impact can these measures have on drug production, supply and trafficking?



The COVID-19 pandemic along with various restrictions imposed to address the pandemic, will temporarily disrupt the illicit drug trade at all stages of the supply chain; from the production of raw materials to the distribution on the street. It should be stated from the onset, that the pandemic will not stop the illicit drug trade; it may slow the trade and cause disruptions, but drug trafficking and all its criminal dimensions will not stop. There are a number of possible impacts the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictive measures can have on access, availability and prices.

The following is a summary of some impacts which can develop at the local, regional and international levels:

- ✚ Decrease in drug supply, therefore reduced availability and access to drugs.
- ✚ Decrease in drug supply may lead to increased prices of drugs, as criminal elements seek to increase their prices from the limited supply and decrease the purity of their products, to boost profits.
- ✚ Drug cartels may withhold and stockpile existing drug supplies in an attempt to manipulate market prices for the drugs.
- ✚ Criminal organizations may seek to exploit the current pandemic and use legitimate methods (use of approved airline flights and ground transportation for distribution of medical supplies) to traffic drugs.
- ✚ Substance users may purchase or obtain drugs from persons who may have contracted the coronavirus and risk becoming infected themselves.
- ✚ Unavailability of chemical precursors⁴ used in the manufacture of cocaine, and other synthetic drugs; this can lead to reduction in the production of synthetic drugs such as fentanyl and methamphetamine.

⁴ Chemical precursors are used in the scientific and manufacturing industries for production of legitimate products. They are also used in the manufacture of controlled drugs such as cocaine. These chemical precursors are not designated for medical use. The Drug Abuse (Prevention and Control) Act CAP 84 A of Grenada, makes provisions for the control of chemical precursors, as designated by the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB).

- ✚ Illicit manufacture, marketing and trafficking of new psychoactive substances (NPS).
- ✚ Illicit manufacture, marketing and trafficking of precursors used for illicit drug manufacture.
- ✚ Due to the unavailability of chemical precursors, criminal organizations may resort to the use of other chemicals and impurities to manufacture recreational drugs. This poses significant health risks as quality and purity of these drugs would decrease.
- ✚ Street-level drug dealers and small scale traffickers, may cut and dilute their products in an effort to increase supplies.
- ✚ Scarcity of drugs may lead to substance users engaging in the making of ‘home-made concoctions’, which are risky, for consumption.
- ✚ The sharp decline in domestic and international air and land travel, will cause a significant increase in express consignments and home delivery for vital supplies. These shipments can provide opportunity for traffickers to hide illicit products.
- ✚ The resources of law enforcement are stretched and redeployed to address the pandemic. As a result, some law enforcement initiatives may be temporarily halted or even terminated. Criminal elements may seize on this situation to conduct their illegal activities.
- ✚ Most controlled drugs⁵ (commonly referred to as illegal/illicit drugs), with the exception of marijuana⁶, are generally smuggled through the legal ports of entry; hidden in vehicles and cargo. The decline in legitimate trade and shipments of cargo, may negatively impact the ability of the drug cartels to ship drugs. However, there are reports of criminal elements world-wide who continue to use legal ports of entry and containerized cargo to ship their drugs.

⁵Drug Abuse (Prevention and Control) Ac, CAP. 84A of Grenada defines ‘controlled drug’ as:

- (a) any narcotic drug for the time being listed in Part I of the First Schedule;
- (b) any psychotropic substance for the time being listed in Part II of the First Schedule; or
- (c) any listed substance for the time being listed in Part III of the First Schedule,

⁶ An example of this situation was the seizure of marijuana by law enforcement offices in Grenada on April 18 and 20, 2020; the marijuana entered through non-authorized ports of entry.

- ✚ Cyber scams, fraud, and other cyber-enabled crimes may increase as people conduct more of their daily tasks online. Working remotely may increase online illicit activities.
- ✚ Decrease in street crime, petty robberies since there are significantly less people on the streets.



What are some measures which persons, including substance users, can implement to stay healthy and drug free during the COVID-19 pandemic?



Here are some ways to help you look after your mental health while keeping a happy, healthy relationship without-alcohol.

- ✚ Look after your general health, including mental health
- ✚ Identify ways to relax and reward yourself
- ✚ Develop alcohol-free ways to have fun
- ✚ Reduce and, or quit drug and alcohol use
- ✚ Don't begin drug use
- ✚ Get support remotely, if unable to access assistance due to existing restrictions
- ✚ Remember that alcohol use is a poor choice of a coping strategy.
- ✚ There is no 'safe limit' for consumption of alcohol. The risk of damage to your health increases with each drink of alcohol consumed.
- ✚ Never use or handle the utensils (glasses, bottles, other utensils be in used) which other persons used in the consumption or dispensing of alcohol.
- ✚ Avoid sharing with others bottles/cups and other utensils which you may use to consume alcohol.



As a parent/guardian, what are some messages I can give to my children about substance use and COVID-19?



Here is some information you can share with you children. Do spend some time with them, in discussion of this information.

- ✚ Make sure that children and young people do not have access to drugs such as alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco cigarettes.
- ✚ Inform them that they should not drink alcohol or smoke or use marijuana (whether in food or other edibles) to prevent COVID-19.
- ✚ Inform them that they should not use alcohol to deal with stress or any emotional problems which they may encounter.
- ✚ Do not consume alcohol in the presence of you children – be a role model.
- ✚ Do not administer alcohol to children to subdue and keep them quiet or to fall asleep.
- ✚ Monitor the screen time of your children on television and electronic devices (laptops, mobile phones, tablets), as some media disseminate fake news, myths about drugs and COVID-19. In addition, some media have increased their advertisement of alcohol products.

Bibliography

Emergency Powers (Covid-19) Proclamation, Statutory Rules and Orders, No. 12 of 2020,

World Health Organization Press Statements, March-April 2020

“COVID-19: Approaching Code Red” Teleconference, Faculty of Medical Sciences, UWI, Mona, Jamaica, April 2020

Poster Messages 1 to 5, Substance Use and COVID-19: A Potentially Deadly Combination, Drug Control Secretariat, April 2020

Alcohol use and misuse during the COVID-19 pandemic: a potential public health crisis?, The Lancet Public Health, April 2020

Alcohol and drug Foundation: <https://adf.org.au/insights/mass-trauma-alcohol-use/>

European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, COVID-19 and People who use drugs, April 2020 http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/topic-overviews/covid-19-and-people-who-use-drugs_en

Guidance for People Who Use Substances on COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus), Yale Program in Addiction Medicine, Global Health Justice Partnership, and Crackdown, April 2020

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report – 73, World Health Organization, April 2, 2020

National Institute on Drug Abuse, COVID-19: Potential Implications for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/04/covid-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders>

Modes of transmission of virus causing COVID-19: implications for IPC precaution recommendations; World Health Organization, March 29, 2020

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Crime and Contagion: The impact of a pandemic on organized crime, March 2020

Cybercrime and COVID19: Risks and Responses, UNODC, April 2020

Money-Laundering and COVID19: Profit and Loss, UNODC, April 2020