

Georgia Department of Public Health discusses soaring fentanyl overdose deaths on National Fentanyl Awareness Day

The Georgia Department of Public Health discussed increasing fentanyl overdose deaths, COVID rates, and a mysterious hepatitis outbreak among children at its monthly meeting Tuesday.

Fentanyl-involved overdose deaths in Georgia increased 218% from 2019 to 2021, said epidemiologist Dr. Laura Edison. That drastic increase represents 1,248 deaths in a two-year-period.

Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, is particularly dangerous because it is 100 times more potent than morphine and because it is often mixed with non-opioid street drugs, said Edison.

Drug users may not know that their drugs are laced with fentanyl and just "one pill is enough to kill," Edison emphasized.

Fentanyl has flooded American streets in the past few years. The Atlanta-Carolina High Intensity Drug Taskforce Agency seized a staggering 70,843 doses of fentanyl in 2021, compared to just 3,415 doses seized by the same agency in 2020, said Edison.

That's about a twenty-fold increase. Such seizures are "just the tip of the iceberg" of the amount of the drug actually on Georgia streets, Edison said.

Almost all fentanyl-involved deaths in Georgia involve another drug as well. These include fentan-



yl-laced cocaine, amphetamines, and benzodiazepines like Xanax.

"No part of the state is being spared from this," Edison said. "While we're seeing the highest counts of overdoses in urban areas, the rates of opioid overdoses tend to be higher in non-urban areas."

Along with public education efforts, "we need to get naloxone into more hands," Edison said. Naloxone (brand name Narcan) is an easy-to-administer drug that can rapidly reverse the effects of an opioid overdose, preventing deaths.

Naloxone is available to anyone in Georgia without a prescription under a standing order from 2019, Public Health Commissioner Dr. Kathleen Toomey pointed out.

However, "angry consumers" have recently called the agency complaining about the high cost

of the drug, said Toomey.

Naloxone prices at retail pharmacies can range from \$47 to \$161 in Georgia, according to drug price comparison website GoodRx.

Toomey said some of the \$636 million coming to the state from an opioid lawsuit settlement with large pharmaceutical companies could help fund getting Naloxone "into the hands of individuals."

Fentanyl test strips are another harm reduction measure that "have been shown to be effective in preventing overdoses and altering drug taking behaviors," said Edison, the DPH epidemiologist. The test strips allow drug users and dealers to test their drugs for fentanyl.

A bill the General Assembly passed this year would remove Georgia's legal prohibition on fentanyl test strips. That bill is awaiting Gov. Brian Kemp's signature.

It's not yet clear how the state will ensure the strips are widely distributed once the bill is signed. That could be another effort funded by the opioid lawsuit settlement funds, Edison said.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Cherie Drenzek updated the board about the mysterious cases of pediatric hepatitis first identified in previously healthy children in Alabama last fall and now being found across the country and the world.

Drenzek emphasized that though the cases of pediatric hepatitis are serious, they are also very rare.

So far, 109 children with the previously unknown form of hepatitis have been identified in the United States, including "several" in Georgia.

None of the children had been vaccinated for COVID, so the outbreak is not driven by the vaccine, as some have speculated. Nor are the cases related to COVID, according to a statement from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Drenzek said one hypothesis scientists are exploring is whether the hepatitis is caused by the common – and usually mild – adenovirus type 41. About half of the children with hepatitis tested positive for the adenovirus, said Drenzek.

"The CDC is casting a very wide net to try identify affected patients and ask very detailed questions about a number of potential exposures," Drenzek said.

COVID numbers are also on the rise in Georgia, with about a 65% increase in reported cases over the last two weeks, Drenzek said. This is in line with national trends.

A new subvariant (BA.2.12.1) is "highly transmissible" and makes up around 40% of all circulating

COVID-19 virus in the United States, Drenzek explained.

She emphasized that COVID numbers are "still at relatively low levels" compared to prior surges and described the current increase as "a slow, steady wave."

Drenzek said vaccinations and boosters continue to prevent severe cases. About 56% of the Georgia population has been fully vaccinated and 24% of the population has received a booster, she said.

"We're again very grateful for the protective ability of our boosters," Drenzek said.

The Department of Public Health has recently distributed more than 58,000 home testing kits to county health departments and health districts across the state, said Dr. David Newton, the agency's Director of Health Protection.

Though the results of most home tests are not reported, the home tests are helpful for people who cannot or do not want to go to the 132 public testing sites currently sponsored by the department, Newton said.

This article and the one appearing below are made available to the Donalsonville News through a news partnership with Capitol Beat News Service, a project of the Georgia Press Educational Foundation.

Georgia High School Association adopts transgender sports ban

The Georgia High School Association's executive committee has voted unanimously to require transgender students to participate in school sports based on the gender identities on their birth certificates.

Wednesday's unanimous vote followed the passage of legislation by the Republican-controlled General Assembly last month that handed the issue of a transgender sports ban to the association.

"I'm proud to have championed this issue in Georgia," GOP Gov. Brian Kemp posted on Facebook after the vote.

Transgender rights advocates blasted the vote as the result of a secretive, rushed process that will do real harm to transgender students

who already are disproportionately victims of violence and suicide.

"At no point during the General Assembly's debate of bills that would have had a similarly devastating impact were supporters of this change able to present a single example of how allowing transgender students to participate in athletics harmed other students in Georgia," said Jeff Graham, executive director of Georgia Equality, the state's largest LG-BTQ+ advocacy group.

Democratic Party of Georgia spokesman Max Flugrath accused Kemp of playing politics with the lives of transgender students.

"Kemp's advocacy for this dangerous policy and gloating upon its enactment under-

scores the cruelty and level of extremism that has defined his time in office," Flugrath said. "He's always put his extreme partisan politics and his political career above our best interests, even if it means hurting our kids and dividing our communities."

The Governor and Republican legislative leaders defended the legislation as ensuring

that girls born female can compete on a level playing field in sports.

"I'm so proud of the tremendous progress we've made in girls' sports here in Georgia," said state Senate President Pro Tempore Butch Miller, R-Gainesville, a candidate for lieutenant governor. "That's why we can't let the craziness of the Woke Mob destroy girls' sports."

Notice of Early/Advance voting

Advanced voting will be conducted in the Office of the Probate Judge in the Seminole County Courthouse, 200 S. Knox Avenue, Donalsonville, Georgia, from May 2, 2022 and continuing during regular business hours (8:30 A.M. through 5:00 P.M.) until 5:00 P.M. on Friday, May 20, 2022.

Please call us, or let us know if you have any disability or need assistance getting into the Courthouse or other special accommodation. We will help in any way allowed under the law.

For more information call 229/524-5256. Michael Jon Rogerson, Election Superintendent
Kristy Wilson, Chief Deputy Registrar

Your final opportunity to vote in this election will be at the polling place in your precinct on Election Day, May 24, 2022.

Notice of right to request Absentee Ballots

All persons eligible to vote in the May 24, 2022, General Primary/Special Election may now request absentee ballots by mail from the Seminole County Registrar at Post Office Box 684, 200 South Knox Avenue, Donalsonville, Georgia 39845, fax number 229-524-8644, phone number 229-524-5256 and email address seminoleprobate@gmail.com.

The deadline for the registrars to receive an application for an absentee ballot and to mail out an application for an absentee ballot is May 13, 2022, at 5:00 p.m..

No absentee ballot may be voted on the day of the election. Any absentee ballot, which has been voted prior to the day of the election, may be mailed to the registrars on the day of the election, but will not be counted unless it reaches the registrars' office by 7:00 P.M. on the day of the election.

Early or on Election Day, May 24

Early voting continues for May 24 primary, ends Friday, May 20

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Who's running?

In Seminole County there may not be any contested races on the ballot; however, this year's election includes the big race for Georgia Governor. Republicans have five candidates to choose from, including current Gov. Brian Kemp, former Senator David Perdue, Catherine Davis, Kandiss Taylor and Tom Williams. Democrat Stacey Abrams is running uncontested.

Other races include Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Agriculture Commissioner, Labor Commissioner, Insurance Commissioner and Public Service Commissioner.

Other seats up for grabs include one U.S. Senate seat, all 14 U.S. House seats, all 56 State Senate seats, all 180 State House seats, four of nine State Supreme Court seats, and four of 15 State Court of Appeals seats.

Where can I see a sample ballot?

You can view sample ballots at the Seminole County Courthouse, and you can also access county-specific ballots by logging in to the state's My Voter Page portal at mvp.sos.ga.gov

Can I still register to vote?

No, the deadline to register to vote in the May 24 Primary Election was April 25. However, you can still vote in Georgia's General Election set to be held in November and certain runoff races. To register to vote for future elections, visit the Seminole County Courthouse during regular business hours or visit sos.ga.gov

Does my party affiliation matter?

Georgia voters do not select a political party affiliation when they register to vote. You can choose a Democratic or Republican primary ballot or you can choose a non-partisan ballot.

No matter what ballot you choose, you will not be formally affiliated with that party and everyone uses the same ballot during the general election.

What do I need to bring with me to vote?

You will need to bring a valid photo ID such as a driver's license, passport or voter identification card.

How do I vote by absentee ballot?

People who are registered to vote in Georgia can request an absentee ballot by mail. Residents do not need an excuse to request an absentee ballot, which must reach their local County Board of Registrar's Office by the time polls close on Election Day.

Every county will have at least one drop-box for absentee ballots. Your absentee ballot can be tracked through the secretary of state's My Voter Page or Georgia Ballot Trax.

What if I have a problem at the polls?

If you encounter a problem at the polls, contact the Seminole County Board of Registrar's Office or the Georgia Secretary of State. Call the Secretary of State at 404-656-2871 (in metro Atlanta) or 877-725-9797 (elsewhere in Georgia) to report an issue. You can also submit a complaint online to the Secretary of State Elections Division.

Remaining key dates . . .

- Early voting (in-person and absentee) continues through Friday, **May 20**
- Final day to submit absentee ballot application: **May 13**
- Mandatory Saturday voting: **May 14**
- Election Day: **May 24**
- Runoff day, if needed: **June 21**