

KINGDOM OF MOROCCO

THE MOROCCAN ASSOCIATION OF ADDICTOLOGY



Recommendations of the Moroccan Association of Addictology (AMA) for users of psychoactive substances, mental health and addictology professionals during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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NON OFFICIAL TRANSLATION

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Rationale

Like other countries in the world, the Kingdom of Morocco is currently experiencing a health crisis due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

Users of psychoactive substances are considered to be a population vulnerable to infection. Regular drug use can have an impact on the immune system, cause respiratory illnesses and subsequently make users more vulnerable to Covid19. It is essential to protect them from infection and from difficulties in accessing the health-care system.

In order to comply with health containment, we are all obliged to reorganise the functioning of the structures for the care of subjects with a problem with addictions and to change our habits.

The Moroccan Association of Addictology accompanies all current health measures and supports patients using psychoactive substances, or any person with addictive behaviour.

We propose recommendations of good practices during the Covid pandemic¹⁹ based on the local reality of the user of psychoactive substances, the strategic orientations of the Ministry of Health of our country and the current national and international scientific debate around the issue. We have also based ourselves on our clinical experiences in the field of addictology.

AMA also intends to support users and their families, staff and workers in addictology, including harm reduction, through a listening unit and videoconferences.

1. Introduction

The situation of drug users is complex in times of pandemic and even more so in a situation of confinement that is often a source of stress and anxiety.

Some patients, faced with this confinement and mandatory distancing, may be faced with psychological distress that needs to be taken into consideration and accompanied.

Stigmatization and difficult access to health care systems are a reality and tend to be a source of stress for users of psychoactive substances.

Users of psychoactive substances are known for their risk-taking. Regular use of psychoactive substances is also associated with serious morbidity and generates various chronic diseases (respiratory, hepatic, cardiovascular, neurological, infectious, etc.). The existence of a serious chronic pathology is currently considered to be an aggravating factor in the case of Covid impairment¹⁹.

Regular use of inhaled products (tobacco, cannabis, cocaine, crack, etc.) increases the risk of infection and the occurrence of severe forms. In some people, such use is responsible for coughing, which in itself favours the transmission of the virus to those around them, even in the case of an infection without symptoms. Sharing a cigarette, a joint, a vaporizer or any other product or material can promote contamination. Finally, containment may also increase passive exposure to tobacco or other tobacco smoke.

In addition, some patients will present an emergency of lack: users will help each other out by sharing their reserves and using other substances as

2. General Recommendations Related to the Prevention of Covid Pandemic19

In the current evolving context, a set of information and preventive behaviours against Covid19 is available on the Ministry of Health website to which reference should be made: <http://www.covidmaroc.ma> .

Managers of addiction facilities should make visible displays and provide clear advice on how to reduce the risk of Covid19 infection.

It is advisable to proceed as follows:

- Strictly apply barrier gestures, in particular hand-washing (water + soap or hydro-alcoholic gel) after each contact with another person, after handling money;
- Use a disposable handkerchief to blow your nose, cough, sneeze or spit, and dispose of it immediately;
- Push and sneeze into his elbow;
- Reduce contact with other people;
- For all necessary travel, do not forget to bring the mandatory certificate of travel to the addiction service that will be given to you by the authorities.
- For patients on methadone, a dated certificate specifying the number of doses delivered by the reference addictology structure may be issued to patients in the event of a check by the authorities.

3. Recommendations related to the management of outpatient consultations in addiction and mental health services during the Covid Pandemic19

Addiction and mental health staff will be under increased pressure during this period of health containment. Requests may concern former patients previously followed up in referral structures, patients integrated into the Methadone Program, patients benefiting from the RoR programs or new patients.

The main recommendations are as follows:

- Remote management is preferred by opting for tele-consultations. The telephone remains an effective link possibly complemented by video-consultation, which facilitates the exchange and avoids the risk of complete isolation of our patients. These calls will make it possible to maintain social links with patients and avoid having them come to the emergency room to consult in these times of pandemic.
- Face-to-face consultations are maintained for situations requiring absolute continuity of care in particular for people on Methadone treatment or for people in emergency situations that cannot be postponed.
- Mental health and addiction professionals can offer patients tele-consultations at a regular and more sustained pace compared to the usual consultation rhythm. Supportive or relapse prevention psychotherapy can be administered remotely.
- Hospitalization appointments should be deferred during the pandemic period and hospitalization is not encouraged during this time.
- Users of psychoactive substances may experience withdrawal situations related to the scarcity or shortage of drugs. Outpatient symptomatic management is recommended, with follow-up preferably by telephone. Some withdrawal symptoms may resemble signs of Covid infection19. A persistent cough with fever and difficulty breathing will suggest possible infection.

- It is recommended that an office or space be identified in advance to isolate a person with infectious symptoms suspected of Covid19 infection and that a protective mask be put on immediately, refer to the Ministry of Health website: <http://www.covidmaroc.ma> .
- Containment is a stressful situation for users. It can lead to overuse or even a mixture of several substances, which can lead to a state of intoxication. Some patients will anticipate a possible shortage and will stockpile substances.
- Long-term drug prescriptions are recommended to avoid unnecessary travel for patients. It is preferable to continue follow-up by telephone.
- Therapeutic and self-support groups (type AA/NA) should be discontinued as previously organized. It is possible to use digital platforms via teleconferencing such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts or to organize conference calls to maintain these meetings, which serve as a social link and essential support for patients.
- Recommend electronic applications or videos on YouTube to do sports, relaxation or meditation, yoga, mind fulness, or discover psychological strategies for relapse prevention.
- Encourage home-based activities with family members and rediscover pleasant activities, such as listening to music, reading, watching movies, cooking, etc.
- Promote a healthy lifestyle, eat a balanced diet and respect sleep schedules.
- To cope with confinement, users are advised to keep in touch with their family and social network (family, friends, sponsors, AA/NA groups) by telephone or through social networks.
- The setting up of a psychological support or listening unit through a toll-free number will give users of psychoactive substances the opportunity to share their distress and difficulties during health confinement.
- Risk-reduction activities (psychosocial support, distribution of injection material or kits and condoms, HIV, BVH and HCV screening, etc.) are highly recommended during this health crisis.

4. Recommendations to mental health and addictology professionals concerning the conditions for prescribing and dispensing methadone in Morocco during the Covid pandemic19.

Mental health and addictology professionals support the need to adapt the conditions for prescribing and dispensing methadone to ensure continuity of essential care in the event of travel problems.

Discontinuation of methadone treatment would not only be a major source of stress for these patients, but would also put them at risk of withdrawal or overdose following unannounced withdrawals.

The recommendations are as follows:

- Do not discontinue methadone during this pandemic period.
- Decrease the contact of patients with addiction problems with the community by avoiding unnecessary outings to keep them at home.
- Managers of addiction services are requested to check the available stock of methadone at their centre(s) in order to better manage it and to predict possible stock shortages.
- Daily Methadone deliveries are replaced by more frequent deliveries. The most stabilized patients can take home doses for up to 28 days.
- Patients who have just entered the Methadone program require more rigorous follow-up. Home delivery is recommended for new entrants after the induction period.
- Be more vigilant about the risk of overdose. Take home naloxone is recommended for management of the signs of overdose by international organizations.
- It is necessary to take into account the enzymatic induction of methadone and the risk of its prolongation of the QT space, in the case of treatment with chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine in the case of Covid infection19.

- Throughout this period of confinement, health care staff will regularly check in with patients on the Methadone programme and provide support and accompaniment at least once a week.
- For the drug treatment of psychiatric or somatic comorbidities of patients on methadone, or withdrawal syndromes from other psychoactive substances, prescriptions can be sent electronically, except for benzodiazepines, which require the prescriber to contact the pharmacist directly. Our prescribing habits must change during this pandemic period in order to protect citizens and respect mandatory containment.
- Patients under opioid substitution treatment (Methadone/Buprenorphine) who are non-residents in Morocco (Moroccans residing abroad or foreigners who are currently stranded in Morocco) can access methadone at the level of the addictology structures to ensure the continuity of their treatment and maintain the stabilization of their clinical condition. The presentation of proof of follow-up and treatment with an opioid agonist treatment is necessary to ensure the relay pending return to the country of origin.
- It would be appropriate to work closely with local RoR Risk Reduction sections, particularly to consider the possibility of RoR teams delivering methadone to the home for patients who are unable to travel, given the current travel restrictions.
- Risk reduction remains a priority to avoid overdoses, or other accidents due to unusual consumption for substitution purposes (misuse of non-dedicated treatments).
- The various addiction workers (doctors, nurses, street workers, etc.) must be protected in the performance of their duties. Raising awareness against the risk of infection and providing them with the necessary protective equipment (masks, disinfectants and hydroalcoholic gels) will ensure safety during their professional practice.
- Psychological support for the mobile teams and the nursing staff will enable them to better manage this period of great stress and the risk of burnout. It is advisable to separate staff into teams and to set up a rotation system.

5. Recommendations for users of psychoactive substances during the Covid-19 pandemic.

a. General recommendations for users of psychoactive substances during the Covid pandemic.19

In these times of pandemic, it is necessary and essential to comply with mandatory health containment.

The main recommendations are as follows:

- If drug treatment is ongoing, contact the addiction service near the home and/or the attending physician by telephone to organise continuity of follow-up and treatment,
- Wash hands before and after use;
- Do not share cigarettes, cannabis joints or any other products/materials;
- Do not share glasses, bottles or cans with others;
- Avoid using silver bills for snorting;
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, mouth if your hands are not clean or if your hands have been in contact with non-disinfected equipment;
- Avoid contact and keep a social distance of at least 1 meter with people outside your home.

b. RoR recommendations for the use of psychoactive substances during the Covid pandemic19

During the pandemic, people are reminded to respect the low-risk consumption guidelines. Users who do not wish to abstain from all psychoactive substances may opt for lower-risk use.

The recommendations are as follows:

- Think about changing your substance use behaviour;
- Reduce the amount of psychoactive substances you use because they will be scarce;
- Have days without use and think about stopping;
- Do not share glasses, cigarettes, electronic cigarettes, joints, pipes, straws, injection tools including sterilized water. If you cannot avoid sharing, for example, use single-use mouthpieces, or disinfect the mouthpieces of electronic cigarettes with alcohol before sharing.
- Minimize the risk of sharing by setting up a small personal tool "stash" and putting the equipment used for smoking, snorting and injecting in a soiled toolbox to avoid accidental contamination.
- Prepare your product yourself: wash your hands thoroughly for 30 seconds with soap and water. Keep preparation surfaces clean and wipe them before and after use with disinfectant wipes, 90° alcohol or bleach. At best, be sure not to handle or touch other people's equipment and/or psychoactive substances. For those who cannot prepare their product themselves, ask those who do prepare it to wash their hands thoroughly and to clean the preparation surfaces before and after.
- Be even more vigilant about the risk of overdose. If consumed alone, consume less product and inject slowly. If you consume with other users, stagger the consumption of each other.

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