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Hamilton

Number of youth in hospital after suicide attempt tripled over 4-month period under COVID-19



Referrals to Eating Disorders Program increased by 90% in 4-month period, McMaster Children's Hospital says

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McMaster Children's Hospital says it has seen a steady increase of youth in crisis since the COVID-19 pandemic began. (McMaster)

6 comments

McMaster Children's Hospital says it has seen a steady increase of youth in crisis since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

According to the hospital, youth admitted for medical support after a suicide attempt has tripled over a four-month period, compared to last year. The hospital also said that patients are staying in hospital longer due to more serious attempts.

McMaster Children's Hospital says a large number of these youth have reported COVID-related issues such as lack of social interaction, increased conflict at home, and the inability to rely on friends as main contributors.

"We are all coping with multiple stressors brought on by the current pandemic," says Dr. Paulo Pires, psychologist and clinical director of Child & Youth Mental Health Outpatient Services.

"We must be attentive to the unique impact of these stressors on children and youth depending on their stage of development."

Increase in use of potentially deadly opioids

The hospital said that over the same time period, youth admitted with substance use disorders has doubled compared to last year, the hospital says. In particular, the use of potentially deadly opioids has increased.

The number of cases admitted to hospital with predominant symptoms of psychosis has doubled, with the large majority related to substance use.



The number of cases admitted to hospital with predominant symptoms of psychosis has doubled, with the large majority related to substance use. (Bobby Hristova/CBC)

Pires says children and youth who are struggling with their mental health may display signs that caregivers can notice.

"Changes in eating, sleeping, and behaviours which last for many days or weeks may be a sign," he says.

"Changes in behaviour can include expressions of distress, disconnecting from loved ones, or acting out behaviours. Caregivers are encouraged to reach out for professional help for their children or for themselves as parents."

Eating disorders are 'unprecedented'

Meanwhile, McMaster Children's Hospital says referrals to its Eating Disorders Program have increased by 90 per cent in a four-month period, compared to last year.

- 76 new cases of COVID-19, web page to support child and youth mental health launches
- Hamilton wants resident input on mental health, addiction, housing and hate crimes

Admissions are projected to increase by 33 per cent over the 12-months since the pandemic started.

"It's unprecedented," says clinical manager Paul Agar.

The hospital says the reasons for the increase are unclear, but the shared hypotheses from hospital professionals and literature cites a combination of factors, such as isolation, risk of over exercising, limited or no school, or limited access to family physicians in the earlier part of the pandemic, as well activities where teachers and coaches would notice changes in health.

Social isolation and other factors

McMaster Children's Hospital says mental health challenges during the pandemic can be a result of:

- Increased isolation and boredom.
- Lack of day-to-day structure.
- Family tension due to more time spent at home.
- Anxiety related to attending school in-person or virtually.
- Limited access to doctors, teachers, coaches and peers who may notice changes in health.
- Additional stress due to systemic racism.

The hospital says learning a new skill and engaging in meaningful activities can increase one's sense of control and recharge their batteries.

Here are some ways to cope that could work:

- Establish routines.
- Exercise (for those who are not restricting their diets and who have not been advised by a health care provider to avoid exercise).
- Eat regularly.
- Sleep regularly.
- Stay connected to those you care about.
- Learn a new skill or find an activity you enjoy.

If you need help, talk to your family doctor.

In the Hamilton area, visit hamilton.ca/CYmentalhealth for resources or call Contact Hamilton at 905-570-8888. You can also call Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or the Canada Suicide Prevention Service: 1-833-456-4566.

There is also more information available in the following video:

Youth Suicide Prevention: We're here if you need us

Watch on YouTube

We're here for you if you need us

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