

Glossary of Key Terms and Concepts Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Asymptomatic: Defined by the [National Library of Medicine](#) as individuals who do not have *symptoms* of an illness or disease. Asymptomatic individuals include those who have been infected with a disease but are not showing symptoms or those who have recovered from a disease. In the case of **COVID-19**, [recent studies](#) show that infected individuals without symptoms can spread the disease to others.

Close contact is defined by the [CDC](#) as “a) being within approximately 6 feet (2 meters) of a COVID-19 case for a prolonged period of time; close contact can occur while caring for, living with, visiting, or sharing a healthcare waiting area or room with a COVID-19 case, or b) having direct contact with infectious secretions of a COVID-19 case (e.g., being coughed on).”

Coronavirus: “Coronaviruses are a large family of *viruses* which may cause illness.” They are named for the crown-like spikes on their surface. Several coronaviruses are known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The most recently discovered coronavirus causes coronavirus disease COVID-19.” [WHO](#) and [CDC](#).

COVID-19: COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered *coronavirus*. This novel (new) coronavirus was first reported in China in December 2019. The [World Health Organization](#) announced COVID-19 as the official name of the disease in February 2020. Other names used to refer to COVID-19 include SARS-CoV-2 and 2019-nCoV.

Community spread: means people have been infected with COVID-19 in a particular area, including some who are not sure how or where they became infected. [CDC](#)

Disease cluster or infection cluster is a group of similar health events that have occurred around the same time, geographic area, and/or common exposure, according to the [CDC](#) and [WHO](#).

Elective procedure/surgery: is [defined by the American Hospital Association](#) as any procedure that is “scheduled rather than a response to an emergency.” Due to the COVID-19 *outbreak*, [the federal government and several state governments and professional associations](#) are recommending or requiring that hospitals and dentists postpone elective procedures, except in the case of patients whose condition cannot wait until the health care system returns to normal operations.

Epidemic: “An epidemic occurs when an infectious disease spreads rapidly to many people.” An epidemic is generally larger and more severe than an outbreak, but less severe than a pandemic. [APIC](#)

Flattening the Curve: This concept is the goal of *social distancing*. Although the overall goal of fighting a *pandemic* or *epidemic* like COVID-19 is to stop the spread of the disease entirely, slowing the spread is critical. The virus will spread very fast without measures to reduce transmission, resulting in a high curve or peak in number of cases at one time, and can overwhelm the healthcare system. By decreasing opportunities for transmission by symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals, spread of the disease will be slower and the rate of new cases per day will be lower, hence a flatter curve. [Anderson et al., 2020](#).

Handwashing guidelines: Proper handwashing reduces the spread of COVID-19. “Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing. If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand

sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry.” [CDC](#)

Higher risk populations: individuals who are at a higher risk for developing *severe illness* from COVID-19 include: older adults age 65 and older, and people of any age with serious *underlying conditions* such as lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, or who are *immunocompromised*. [CDC](#)

How COVID-19 spreads: COVID-19 is thought to primarily spread through person-to-person contact, either “between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet)”, or through respiratory droplets that are produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes and can land in the mouth, noses, or eyes of nearby people. The virus can also spread through contaminated surfaces, where it may be present for a few hours or even a few days. [CDC](#) and [van Doremalen et al., 2020](#).

Immunocompromised: Individuals with a weakened immune system. Immunocompromised individuals “have a reduced ability to fight infections and other diseases” and are more likely to experience *severe illness* from COVID-19. [NIH](#) and [CDC](#)

Incubation period is defined by the [CDC](#) as the time from exposure to an agent, such as a virus, until the first symptoms develop. Recent studies have found the incubation period of COVID-19 to be 1-14 days and is most commonly around 5 days. [WHO](#)

Isolation is “the separation of a person or group of people known or reasonably believed to be infected with a communicable disease and potentially infectious from those who are not infected to prevent spread of the communicable disease. Isolation for public health purposes may be voluntary or compelled by federal, state, or local public health order.” [CDC](#)

Outbreak: the occurrence of cases in excess of what would normally be expected in a defined community, geographical area or season.” An outbreak is similar to an epidemic, but usually occurs in a smaller area. [WHO](#) and [CDC](#)

Pandemic: A global spread of disease to several countries or continents, usually affecting a large number of people. A pandemic affects a greater geographical area and a greater number of people than a *outbreak* or *epidemic*. The World Health Organization (WHO) [classified COVID-19 as a pandemic](#) on March 11, 2020. [CDC](#)

Prevention methods: The [CDC](#) recommends several actions that individuals should take to protect themselves from COVID-19 and to reduce transmission. 1. Clean your hands often (see *handwashing techniques*) and avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth. 2. Avoid close contact (6 ft) with others and practice *social distancing*. 3. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze or use the inside of your elbow, and immediately wash your hands. 4. Stay home [if you are sick](#). 5. Wear a facemask if you are sick around other people. Individuals do not need to wear a facemask if they are not sick. 6. Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily, including tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks.

Quarantine generally “means the separation of a person or group of people reasonably believed to have been *exposed to a communicable disease but not yet symptomatic*, from others who have not been so exposed, to prevent the possible spread of the communicable disease.” [CDC](#)

Self-Observation: according to the [CDC](#), means “people should remain alert for subjective fever, cough, or difficulty breathing. If they feel feverish or develop cough or difficulty breathing during the self-observation period, they should take their temperature, self-isolate, limit contact with others, and seek advice by telephone from a healthcare provider or their local health department to determine whether medical evaluation is needed.”

Severe illness: Those who develop severe illness from COVID-19 are more at risk of complications from the disease. Complications can include pneumonia in both lungs, organ failure in several organs, and death. Older adults and those with **underlying conditions** are more at risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19. [Mayo Clinic](#).

Social Distancing is the act of remaining out of crowded public places where close contact with others may occur, “avoiding mass gatherings, and maintaining distance (approximately 6 feet or 2 meters) from others when possible.” [CDC](#)

Stigma “occurs when people associate a risk with a specific people, place, or thing – like a minority population group – and there is no evidence that the risk is greater in that group than in the general population. Stigmatization is especially common in disease outbreaks.” Stigma hurts everyone by creating fear or anger towards other people. Some groups of people who may be experiencing stigma because of COVID-19 include: persons of Asian descent, people who have traveled, emergency responders or healthcare professionals. [CDC](#)

Symptoms: The “most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, tiredness, and dry cough. Some patients may have aches and pains, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat or diarrhea. These symptoms are usually mild and begin gradually.” Symptoms range from mild to **severe** and may appear 1-14 days after exposure. In some cases, infected individuals report no symptoms. [CDC](#) and [WHO](#).

Testing and diagnosis of COVID-19: Laboratory tests can identify current infection with the virus that causes COVID-19 in respiratory specimens. These tests are Real-Time Reverse Transcriptase (RT)-PCR Diagnostic Panels, and can produce results in 4 to 6 hours. Testing is performed by state and local health departments, as well as some medical providers. [CDC has guidance](#) for who should be tested, but decisions about testing are at the discretion of state and local health departments and/or individual clinicians. Those who test negative for COVID-19 probably were not infected at the time they were tested, but a negative test result does not rule out getting sick later. Another type of test is soon to be available. Blood serum tests are being developed to test for antibodies to COVID-19, which are produced when a person’s immune system responds after an infection. This type of test can identify who was previously infected with COVID-19 and has since recovered, as well as those that have an active infection. [CDC](#) and [AAAS](#).

Treatment of COVID-19: “While some western, traditional or home remedies may provide comfort and alleviate symptoms of COVID-19, there is no evidence that current medicine can prevent or cure the disease. However, there are several ongoing clinical trials that include both western and traditional medicines.” [WHO](#)

Underlying conditions are pre-existing health conditions. Persons with serious underlying medical conditions, as well as older adults, are more at risk of developing serious illness from COVID-19 than others. Serious underlying health conditions that make a person more at risk for developing severe

illness include: chronic lung disease, moderate to severe asthma, heart disease with complications, high blood pressure, diabetes, severe obesity (BMI ≥ 40), renal disease, liver disease, or those who are immunocompromised due to conditions such as receiving cancer treatment. [CDC](#).

Virus: Viruses are very tiny germs that are made of genetic material inside of a protein coating. Viruses invade living, normal cells inside your body and can kill, damage, or change the cells and make you sick. Different viruses attack certain cells in your body such as your liver, respiratory system, or blood. Viruses cause infectious diseases such as the common cold, flu, warts, and HIV. COVID-19 is a virus that affects the respiratory system. [NLM](#).