

COVID-19 Terminology for Journalists and Media Outlets

Asymptomatic

When carriers of a disease do not show signs or symptoms of a disease, but can still transmit it. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), COVID-19 likely has a two to 14-day incubation period, based on what they have seen with other coronaviruses.

BiPap machine

A type of ventilator used to help COVID-19 patients breathe. BiPap is short for “bilevel positive airway pressure.”

Case fatality rate (CFR)

The death rate. An estimate of the risk of mortality from a contagious disease. The CFR is calculated by dividing the number of deaths caused by a disease by the number of cases of that disease in a given time period.

Chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine

Drugs primarily used to treat and prevent malaria. Clinical trials of these drugs are underway, but early evidence is still not clear they are useful.

Clinical trial

A research experience conducted on human participants, designed to test the safety and efficacy of a potential vaccine or treatment.

Close contact

A person who may be at risk of a contagious disease because of their proximity or exposure to someone who is known to have the disease. For COVID-19, the CDC defines a close contact as anyone who has been within 6 feet of a person infected with the virus for a prolonged period of time, or has had direct contact with the infected person’s bodily fluids.

Cluster

A disease cluster or infection cluster is a group of similar health events that have occurred in the same area around the same time.

Community transmission/spread

Infections identified in a given geographic area without a history of travel elsewhere, and no connection to a known case.

Confirmed cases

The number of cases that have been confirmed by diagnostic testing. The actual number of cases that exist is likely much higher.

Contact tracing

The process of identifying, assessing and managing people who have been exposed to a contagious disease to prevent onward transmission.

Cordon sanitaire (see also isolation, quarantine)

The restriction of movement in and out of a region or city, which prevents anyone from leaving a defined geographic area infected by a disease to stop its spread.

Coronavirus

A family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases, such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV). The novel coronavirus recently discovered has been named SARS-CoV-2, and it causes COVID-19.

COVID-19

The name of the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, which is short for “Coronavirus Disease 2019.” If you’re sick, you have COVID-19. You were infected by SARS-CoV-2.

Droplet transmission/spread

A mode of transmission for a contagious disease that involves relatively large, short-range — less than 6 feet — respiratory droplets produced by sneezing, coughing or talking.

Endemic

A disease that regularly infects humans, like the flu, strep throat or any common illness. There are four coronavirus strains that commonly infect humans, usually manifesting as colds.

Epidemic

An increase, often sudden, in the number of cases of a disease above what is normally expected in that population in that area. When there are enough outbreaks, in places beyond that initial spot, that amounts to an epidemic.

Essential activities

Tasks that are essential to an individual's health or safety or the health and safety of their family or household members, which may include obtaining food or medicine, seeking urgent medical attention or other necessary purposes.

Essential government functions

All services needed to ensure the continuing operation of the government agencies and provide for the health, safety and welfare of the public.

Flattening the curve

Slowing a virus' spread to reduce the peak number of cases and related demands on hospitals and infrastructure, which could result in more deaths.

Fomite

An inanimate object that can be the vehicle for transmission of an infectious agent (e.g., bedding, towels or surgical instruments). There is evidence that coronavirus spreads via fomites, although this is a less common route of transmission.

Herd immunity

When enough people become immune to a disease — either through exposure or via a vaccine — that the spread of the disease begins to slow, or stop, within a population.

Home isolation

The directive persons who have symptoms or laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 have been given, to stay at home until they are recovered.

Incubation

The length of time between when an infection begins and when there are apparent signs of the disease.

Index case

The first documented case of an infectious disease. An 'index patient' is the first person infected with a disease in an epidemic.

Isolation

Separating people sick with a contagious disease from those who are not sick.

MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome)

Another type of coronavirus. The acronym refers to the illnesses, while MERS-CoV refers to the disease.

Modes of transmission

How a virus spreads from one person to another. Respiratory infections can be transmitted through droplets of different sizes.

N95 respirator (surgical mask)

Personal Protective Equipment that is used to protect the wearer from airborne particles and from liquid contaminating the face. Facemasks are simply a physical barrier, while respirators tend to be tighter fitting and have an element of air filtration.

Novel

Meaning "new," a **novel coronavirus** is a strain that hasn't been detected in humans before. The virus responsible for the current epidemic is often called the novel coronavirus.

One Health

The One Health approach is a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach — working at the local, regional, national, and global levels — with the goal of achieving optimal **health** outcomes recognizing the interconnection between people, animals, plants, and their shared environment. Coronaviruses affect both humans and animals, and COVID-19 is an example of a virus that has jumped from animals to humans; it is a zoonotic disease. A One Health approach is necessary to create solutions through the lens of collaboration between the animal, human, and environmental sectors.

Pandemic

A worldwide spread of an infectious disease, usually affecting a large number of people.

PCR Testing

A type of testing protocol to determine if a person has contracted the COVID-19. The test works through a process called 'polymerase chain reaction (PCR), which identifies the DNA of the virus. The sample used in PCR testing can be obtained through a throat or nasal swab.

Person-to-person spread

When the virus has been transmitted due to close contact between people, whether the interaction involves actual physical contact or just a cough or sneeze in close quarters, which is different than when a disease is spread via contaminated surfaces or via animals.

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Masks, gloves, face shields and other gear that keeps health care workers from catching an infection.

Physical distancing

Measures taken to reduce person-to-person contact in a given community, in order to stop or slow down the spread of a contagious disease.

Pneumonia

When the small air sacs of the lungs (alveoli, the structures where gases from the atmosphere are exchanged with the blood) become inflamed and fill up with fluid. A possible symptom of COVID-19.

Presumptive case

A person who is exhibiting signs of COVID-19, has been tested, and is awaiting laboratory confirmation of the results.

Public health emergency

An official designation that can help the government access special funds and resources to address the emergency.

PUI – Person Under Investigation

A person under investigation is someone who is suspected of potentially having COVID-19.

Quarantine

Separating and restricting the movement of people exposed, or potentially exposed, to a contagious disease.

Respirator

A type of mask designed to protect people from particulate matter or droplets in the air that may be contaminated with the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

R0/reproductive rate

An epidemiological metric used to describe the contagiousness or transmissibility of infectious agents. It is an estimate of the average number of new cases of a disease that each case generates, at a given point in time. R0 estimates for the virus that causes COVID-19 are around 2 to 3, which is slightly higher than that for seasonal influenza (R0 ~1.2-1.3), but far lower than more contagious diseases such as measles (R0 ~12 - 18).

Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR)

A technology used for COVID-19 diagnostic testing. It looks for the virus's genetic signature.

SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2)

The formal name of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 disease.

Screening

The act of verifying a person's potential exposure to the disease before conducting testing.

Self-quarantine

The act of staying home and away from other people as much as possible after exposure.

Serological tests

A diagnostic test that looks for antibodies (a blood protein built to help fight off a specific virus or pathogen), which could tell if someone has ever been infected with COVID-19, and could suggest they are possibly immune.

Shelter in place

All people must remain at their place of residence, except to conduct essential activities, essential businesses, and essential government functions.

Social distancing

The act of remaining physically separate from other people in an effort to slow the spread of disease transmission.

Stay-at-home order

Enforceable restrictions on where residents can go in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Social distancing (see also physical distancing)

Measures taken to reduce person-to-person contact in a given community, in order to stop or slow down the spread of a contagious disease (such as COVID-19). These measures may include working from home, closing offices and schools, canceling events and avoiding public transportation.

Symptomatic

When someone is showing symptoms of a particular illness or a disease. For COVID-19, common symptoms include fever, cough or shortness of breath.

Therapeutics

Drugs that lessen the severity of disease symptoms or keep people from getting severely sick or dying.

Vaccine

A formulation to stimulate the immune system to produce antibodies for a pathogen in the hope of providing immunity to that pathogen.

Ventilator

A device or machine that delivers air into the lungs through a tube that is placed into the mouth or nose and down into the windpipe.

Viral shedding

The period of time after the virus has replicated inside the body and is released into the environment. In the case of COVID-19, evidence suggests that the virus is most contagious when symptoms are evident and viral shedding is high.

Zoonotic

Zoonotic diseases exist in animals but can also infect humans. COVID-19 is a zoonotic disease. See One Health definition above.

Sources: Global Health Policy's [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Outbreak Glossary](#), CNN's [Pandemic, COVID-19 and all the coronavirus terms you need to know](#), Vox's [Ventilator vs. respirator, quarantine vs. isolation: COVID-19 pandemic terms, defined](#), FDA's [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)