

COVID-19 TERMINOLOGY FACTSHEET

Biology

Antibody

A protein found in the blood that is produced in response to germs invading the body. Antibodies protect us from disease by binding to germs and destroying them.

Antigen

Germs or foreign substances in the body that can cause disease. The presence of antigens in the body triggers the immune system and usually results in the production of antibodies.

COVID-19 (Coronavirus disease)

COVID-19 is the illness caused by SARS-CoV-2. COVID-19 stands for “coronavirus disease 2019.” Symptoms of COVID-19 include cough, fever, and shortness of breath.

Clinical trial

A research study performed in people that are aimed at evaluating a medical, surgical, or behavioral intervention. Clinical trials are the primary way that researchers find out if a new treatment is safe and effective in people.

Coronavirus

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses and get their name from the spikes (coronas) that appear on the viruses under a microscope. Coronaviruses can cause less-dangerous diseases like the common cold or can cause dangerous illnesses like severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

Immune system

The immune system is the network of cells and processes throughout your body that help you avoid getting infected and to help you get better if you do become infected.

Immunity

Immunity is the body’s ability to resist or fight off an infection.

Immunocompromised

This describes a person who has an immune system that is unable to resist or fight infections. Someone who is immunocompromised is especially vulnerable to COVID-19 and more severe complications. This can be caused by several illnesses but can also be caused by some treatments for illnesses. Can also be called immune-compromised or immunodeficient.

Messenger RNA (mRNA)

Messenger RNA (mRNA) is a type of genetic material found in cells. mRNA molecules carry DNA’s genetic code outside the cell nucleus so it can be used as the instructions to build proteins.

Monoclonal Antibody

Monoclonal Antibodies (mAbs) are made in a laboratory to fight a particular infection and are given to you directly in an infusion. The mAb treatment gives your body the antibodies it needs to protect itself. The mAb treatment doesn’t replace the need for a COVID-19 vaccine but it can help you if you are at risk for developing serious COVID-19.

Mutation

A mutation occurs when a DNA gene is damaged or changed in such a way that it alters the genetic message carried by that gene. Mutations can be caused by mistakes when the DNA is copied or as a result of environmental factors such as UV light or cigarette smoke.

Reinfection

Reinfection means a person was infected once, recovered, and then later became infected again.



SARS

SARS stands for severe acute respiratory syndrome. SARS is a coronavirus that first infected humans in 2002. There have been no outbreaks of SARS since. SARS and SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) have some genetic similarities, but the illnesses they cause are different.

SARS-CoV-2

SARS-CoV-2 is the virus that causes COVID-19. It is believed to have started in animals and spread to humans. Although we don't know for sure how SARS-CoV-2 spread from animal to human, SARS-CoV-2 is a betacoronavirus, which means it originated in bats.

Spike Protein

The proteins that surround the SARS-CoV-2 virus and stick to human cells during infection.

Variant

A change or alteration in the original. In the case of COVID-19, a variant is a mutation (change) in which the original virus develops new characteristics.

Variant of interest

A variant is classified as a variant of interest if it shows specific genetic markers that have been associated with reduced efficacy of treatments or predicted increase in transmissibility or disease severity.

Variant of concern

A variant is classified as a variant of concern if there is evidence of an increase in transmissibility, more severe disease, reduced effectiveness of treatments or vaccines, or diagnostic detection failures.

Viral load

Viral load refers to the amount of virus that you are exposed to. For example, someone who is exposed to a relatively small amount of the coronavirus might not have any symptoms while someone exposed to a large amount is more likely to get more severe symptoms.

Virus

A small infectious organism made up of genetic material (DNA or RNA) wrapped in a protein coat. Viruses can't multiply on their own; they reproduce by invading living cells and taking control of them.

Zoonotic

A disease that was originally detected in animals, but now also infects people.

Epidemiology

Case investigation

Case investigation is part of the process of supporting patients with suspected or confirmed infection. Public health staff works with a patient to help them recall everyone they've had close contact with while they were contagious.

Cluster

A greater than expected number of cases of a disease in a group of people living or working in the same area during a set time period.

Communicable

Communicable diseases are illnesses that can be spread or transmitted from one person to another. Communicable diseases are also known as infectious or transmissible diseases.

Community spread

Circulation of a disease among people in a certain area with no clear explanation of how they were infected (did not travel to an affected area, had no close link to another confirmed case). This is sometimes called community transmission.

Contact tracing

A disease control measure where public health workers (known as contact tracers) work with infected people to identify anyone they had close contact with while they were contagious. The exposed contacts are then informed that they might be infected and to monitor themselves for symptoms.

Death rate/Mortality rate

Mortality rate (or death rate) is a measure of the number of deaths in a particular area or period, or from a particular cause.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness is the degree to which a vaccine prevents disease and transmission in the real world.



Efficacy

Efficacy is the degree to which a vaccine prevents disease and transmission under ideal and controlled circumstances.

Endemic

An endemic is a disease outbreak that is consistently present but limited to a particular region.

Epidemic

An epidemic is an unexpected increase in the number of disease cases in a specific geographical area.

Epidemiology

Epidemiology is the study of why and how often diseases occur in different groups of people. Epidemiologists study and analyze the distribution, patterns, and determinants of health and disease conditions within populations.

Herd immunity

A situation in which a large proportion of a population is immune to a disease (through vaccination and/or prior illness) to make its spread from person to person unlikely. Even those not vaccinated are offered protection because the disease has little opportunity to spread within the community. Herd immunity to viruses that cause respiratory tract infection is usually acquired by high rates of vaccination.

Infection Prevention and Control

Infection prevention and control (IPC) is a practical, evidence-based approach which prevents patients and healthcare workers from being harmed by avoidable infection.

Mitigation

Mitigation refers to a sustained action taken to reduce or eliminate risk to people and property from hazards and their effects.

Outbreak

An outbreak is a greater-than-anticipated increase in the number of endemic cases. It can also be a single case in a new area. If an outbreak is not quickly controlled, it can become an epidemic.

Pandemic

A pandemic is an epidemic that has spread over multiple countries or continents.

Positivity rate

Positivity rate is the number of all tests for an illness that are positive.

Sensitivity

Sensitivity refers to a test's ability to identify an individual with disease as positive. A highly sensitive test means that there are few false negative results, and fewer cases of disease are missed.

Specificity

Specificity refers to a test's ability to identify an individual who does not have a disease as negative. A highly specific test means that there are few false positive results.

Surveillance

Public health surveillance is the ongoing, systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of health-related data.

Transmission

Transmission occurs when an infected person touches or exchanges body fluids with someone else. This can happen before an infected person is aware that they are sick.

Spread of Disease

Aerosol

A tiny particle or droplet that is suspended in the air.

Asymptomatic

Asymptomatic means there are no symptoms. You are considered asymptomatic if you have recovered from a disease and no longer have symptoms, or if you have a disease but do not have symptoms.

Congregate settings

A congregate setting is an environment where a number of people reside, meet, or gather in close proximity for a period of time.

Droplet

A tiny moist particle that is released when you cough or sneeze.

Incubation period

The time from when you're exposed to an infectious disease to when you get symptoms. The incubation period for COVID-19 is between 2-14 days.

Pre-symptomatic

Pre-symptomatic means you have contracted the virus and may soon feel symptoms, but at the moment, you don't have any.

Super-spreader

A super-spreader is a person who transmits an infectious disease to an unexpectedly or unusually large number of other people.

Symptomatic

Symptomatic can mean showing symptoms, or it may concern a specific symptom. Symptoms are signs of disease or injury.

Prevention

Flattening the curve

Slowing the spread of COVID-19. Flattening the curve involves strategies to decrease transmission of the disease like wearing a mask/face covering over your nose and mouth, practicing physical distancing, and washing your hands often with soap and water or hand sanitizer.

Hand hygiene

A key strategy for slowing the spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. It is important to wash your hands with soap and water (as warm as you can handle) for at least 20 seconds.

N95 respirator

Sometimes called an N95 mask. While an N95 respirator looks like a surgical mask, it is actually a respirator that filters out at least 95% of particles in the air. It is worn on the face and forms a tight seal around the nose and mouth. N95 respirators are recommended for healthcare personnel in clinical settings, but are not recommended for public use.

Quarantine

Quarantine involves separating and restricting the movements of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.

Respirator

A piece of personal protective equipment (PPE) worn over the nose and mouth or face to prevent the inhalation of airborne particles, gases, or vapors.

Self-isolation

Stricter than quarantine, self-isolation refers to staying in a contained area because you have COVID-19 and are trying to avoid infecting others.

Self-monitoring

Self-monitoring means people should monitor themselves for fever by taking their temperatures twice a day and remain alert for cough or difficulty breathing.

Social/physical distancing

Putting physical distance between yourself and other people. This means avoiding large groups of people and maintaining at least six feet apart from others when possible.

Stay-at-home order

An order from the government that restricts movements of a population as a mass quarantine strategy for mitigating an epidemic or pandemic by ordering residents to stay home except for essential tasks or work in essential businesses. Stay-at-home orders typically come from state or Tribal governments.

Surgical mask

A surgical mask is a loose-fitting, disposable device that creates a physical barrier between the mouth and nose of the wearer and potential contaminants in the immediate environment. A surgical mask is meant to help block particle droplets, splashes, or sprays that may contain germs.

Ventilator

A machine usually used in a hospital setting that blows air through tubes into a patient's airways. Also known as a mechanical ventilator.

Medical Response

Adverse events

Any health problem that happens after a shot or other vaccine. An adverse event might be truly caused by a vaccine, or it might be pure coincidence.

Antiviral medicines

A class of drugs used to treat viral infections.

Convalescent plasma therapy

A treatment that involves taking blood from someone who has the antibodies for a disease, separating out the plasma (the clear liquid part), and then giving it to someone who is sick with the same disease.

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Specialized clothing or equipment worn by an employee for protection against infectious materials. In healthcare settings, PPE may include gloves, gowns, masks, and respirators.

Screening

Screening is not the same as COVID-19 testing. Screening helps healthcare workers determine if you actually need a COVID-19 test by asking basic questions about your health and recent health history. Screening can also include other health procedures, such as taking your temperature.

Severe illness

Severe illness means that a person with COVID-19 may be hospitalized, need intensive care, require a ventilator to help them breathe, or even die.

Testing

Antibody (serology) test

Antibody tests check to see if you have antibodies in your blood that show you were previously infected with the virus. This test is NOT a diagnostic test and is NOT used to determine whether you have COVID-19.

Antigen (rapid) test

Antigen tests, also commonly known as rapid tests, look for proteins (antigens) in a sample taken from your nose or throat. This is a diagnostic test and is used to determine whether you have COVID-19.

Diagnostic test

Diagnostic tests check to see if you are infected. A sample is taken and analyzed in a lab to see if it contains genetic material from the virus.

Drive-thru testing

Used in place of visiting a doctor's office or other indoor healthcare facility. Patients pull up in their cars to a specific outdoor site where healthcare workers stand outside and do diagnostic or antibody testing through car windows. These designated testing stations reduce the likelihood of further spreading illness.

PCR Test

Stands for polymerase chain reaction test. PCR tests determine if you are infected by analyzing a sample to see if it contains genetic material from the virus.

Vaccines

Booster

An additional dose of a vaccine needed periodically to "boost" the immune system.

Emergency Use Authorization (EUA)

During public health emergencies, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can speed up the process of approving drugs, such as the COVID-19 vaccines. EUAs are different from the regular FDA approval process, but it doesn't mean that drugs under EUA are unsafe.



Full FDA approval

Full FDA approval of a drug means that data on the drug's effects have been reviewed by the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research (CDER), and the drug is shown to provide benefits that outweigh its known and potential risks for the intended population.

mRNA vaccine

mRNA vaccines contain mRNA, which causes the body's cells to make proteins, which will trigger the immune system to make antibodies to protect you from a disease. The Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are both mRNA vaccines.

Protein subunit vaccine

Protein subunit vaccines are vaccines that include harmless pieces of a virus instead of the entire germ.

Vaccine

Vaccines introduce a small amount of a germ that has been weakened or killed into the body via injection, mouth, or nasal spray. This will trigger the immune system to produce proteins (antibodies) that remain in the body to help it build immunity to a disease. These antibodies help your body fight off infection. There are currently three safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines available.

Vaccine Passport

A vaccine passport is a document that proves someone has gotten their COVID-19 vaccine. This is currently not a requirement in the US.

Viral vector vaccine

Viral vector vaccines use a modified version of a virus to enter the cells. The virus is attenuated, which means it does not cause disease or reproduce. The Johnson and Johnson/Janssen COVID-19 vaccine is a viral vector vaccine.

Sources:

<https://www.uab.edu/news/health/item/11769-learn-relevant-terminology-for-the-covid-19-vaccine-rollout>

<https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/covid-19-glossary>

<https://uvahealth.com/services/covid19-glossary>

<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2020/clarifying-covid-19-terminology>

<https://www.webmd.com/lung/coronavirus-glossary#5>

<https://www.ynhhs.org/patient-care/covid-19/Vaccine/vaccine-glossary>

