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Summary
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious acute respiratory disease caused by a novel coronavirus. The World Health Organization (WHO) was informed of cases of pneumonia of unknown microbial aetiology associated with Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China on 31 December 2019. The WHO later announced that a novel coronavirus had been detected in samples taken from these patients. Since then, the epidemic has escalated and rapidly spread around the world, with the WHO first declaring a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020, and then formally declaring it a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Clinical trials and investigations to learn more about the virus, its origin, how it affects humans, and its management are ongoing.

Definition
A potentially severe acute respiratory infection caused by the novel coronavirus severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The clinical presentation is generally that of a respiratory infection with a symptom severity ranging from a mild common cold-like illness, to a severe viral pneumonia leading to acute respiratory distress syndrome that is potentially fatal. Characteristic symptoms include fever, cough, dyspnoea, and loss of taste/smell, although some patients may be asymptomatic. Complications of severe disease include, but are not limited to, multi-organ failure, septic shock, and venous thromboembolism. Symptoms may be persistent and continue for more than 12 weeks in some patients.
Epidemiology

Adults

- In China, 87% of confirmed cases were aged 30 to 79 years and 3% were aged 80 years or older. Approximately 51% of patients were male.[4]
- In Italy, the median age and prevalence of comorbidities was higher compared with China.[5]
- In the UK, the median age of patients was 73 years and males accounted for 60% of admissions in a prospective observational cohort study of more than 20,000 hospitalised patients.[6]
- In the US, older patients (aged ≥65 years) accounted for 31% of all cases, 45% of hospitalisations, 53% of intensive care unit admissions, and 80% of deaths, with the highest incidence of severe outcomes in patients aged ≥85 years.[7] Cases in children, adolescents, and young adults increased between October to December 2020; however, hospitalisations, intensive care unit admissions, and deaths remain low for these groups (2.5%, 0.8%, and <0.1% respectively, based on available data).[8]

Children

- Evidence suggests that children have a lower susceptibility to infection compared with adults, with an odds ratio of 0.56 for being an infected contact compared with adults. Adolescents appear to have similar susceptibility to adults.[9]
- The mean age of children with infection is 6.5 years.[10] Infection rates in children and adolescents vary according to geographical location:[4] [11] [12] [13] [14] [15] [16]
  - China - 2.1% (median age 7 years)
  - Italy - 1.2% (median age 4 to 5 years; higher in males but not statistically significant)
  - Spain - 0.8% (median age 3 years)
  - US - 13% (or 4030 cases per 100,000 children in the population) as of 11 February 2021.
- In the UK, a prospective observational cohort study found that children and young adults represented 0.9% of all hospitalised patients at the time. The median age of children admitted to hospital was 4.6 years, 56% were male, 35% were under 12 months of age, and 42% had at least one comorbidity. In terms of ethnicity, 57% were White, 12% were South Asian, and 10% were Black. Age under 1 month, age 10 to 14 years, and Black race were risk factors for admission to critical care.[17]
- In the US, a retrospective cohort study of over 135,000 children found that the mean age of infected children was 8.8 years, and 53% were male. In terms of ethnicity, 59% were White, 15% were Black, 11% were Hispanic, and 3% were Asian. Only 4% of children tested positive for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in this population, and clinical manifestations were typically mild.[18]
- Globally, the case fatality rate in children appears to be higher in low- and middle-income countries compared with high-income countries.[19]
- Most cases in children are from familial clusters, or children who have a history of close contact with an infected patient. It is rare for children to be the index case in household transmission clusters.[20]
- Unlike adults, children do not seem to be at higher risk for severe illness based on age or sex.[21]

Pregnant women

- A meta-analysis of over 2500 pregnant women with confirmed COVID-19 found that 73.9% of women were in the third trimester; 50.8% were from Black, Asian, or minority ethnic groups; 38.2% were obese; and 32.5% had chronic comorbidities.[22]
• In the UK, the estimated incidence of admission to hospital with confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection in pregnancy is 4.9 per 1000 maternities. Most women were in the second or third trimester. Of these patients, 41% were aged 35 years or older, 56% were from Black or other ethnic minority groups, 69% were overweight or obese, and 34% had pre-existing comorbidities.[23]

• In the US, 65,515 cases have been reported in pregnant women (as of 8 February 2021), with 11,071 hospitalisations and 76 deaths.[24] According to an analysis of approximately 400,000 women aged 15 to 44 years with symptomatic disease, Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black pregnant women appear to be disproportionately affected during pregnancy.[25]

Healthcare workers

• The incidence of infection in healthcare workers ranged from 0% to 49.6% (by polymerase chain reaction), and the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 seropositivity ranged from 1.6% to 31.6%. The wide ranges are likely related to differences in settings, exposures, rates of community transmission, symptom status, use of infection control measures, and other factors. There was no association between sex and age and risk for infection or seropositivity. However, Black, Asian, or Hispanic ethnicity was significantly associated with an increased risk of infection compared with White people.[26][27]

• A systematic review and meta-analysis of nearly 130,000 healthcare workers estimated the overall seroprevalence of SARS-CoV-2 antibodies to be 8.7%, with higher seroprevalence reported in North America (12.7%) compared with Europe (8.5%), Africa (8.2%), and Asia (4%). Risk factors for seropositivity included male sex; Black, Asian, or Hispanic ethnicity; working in a COVID-19 unit; patient-facing work; and frontline healthcare work.[28]

• Approximately 14% of the cases reported to the World Health Organization are in healthcare workers (range 2% to 35%).[29]

• The majority of healthcare workers with COVID-19 reported contact in the healthcare setting. In a study of over 9000 cases reported in healthcare workers in the US, 55% had contact only in a healthcare setting, 27% only in a household, 13% only in the community, and 5% in more than one setting.[30]

• The most frequently affected healthcare workers were nurses. Only 5% of healthcare workers developed severe disease and 0.5% died.[31] The incidence of severe or critical disease and mortality in healthcare workers was lower than the incidence of severe or critical disease and mortality in all patients.[32]

• Patient-facing healthcare workers were three times more likely to be admitted to hospital compared with non-patient-facing workers according to a study in Scotland. In the same study, healthcare workers and their household members accounted for 17% of hospitalisations.[33]

• Analysis of hospitalisation data from 13 sites in the US found that 6% of hospitalised adults were healthcare workers, and 36% of these people were in nursing-related roles. Around 90% of hospitalised healthcare workers had at least one underlying condition, the most common conditions being obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.[34]

Resources

• [WHO: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) dashboard]

• [CDC: COVID data tracker weekly review]

• [UK Office for National Statistics: coronavirus (COVID-19) infection survey, UK statistical bulletins]

• [UK Department of Health and Social Care: REACT-1 studies – monthly results]
Risk factors

**Strong contact with probable or confirmed case**

People who have been in contact with a probable or confirmed case are at increased risk of infection.

The World Health Organization defines a contact as a person who has experienced any one of the following exposures during the 2 days before and the 14 days after the onset of symptoms of a probable or confirmed case: face-to-face contact with a probable or confirmed case within 1 metre (3 feet) and for at least 15 minutes; direct physical contact with a probable or confirmed case; direct care for a patient with probable or confirmed COVID-19 without using recommended personal protective equipment; or other situations as indicated by local risk assessments.[184]

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines a close contact as someone who has been within 2 metres (6 feet) of an infected person for at least 15 minutes over a 24-hour period, beginning 2 days before symptom onset (or 2 days before testing in asymptomatic patients).[185]

**Residence/work/travel in location with high risk of transmission**

People who live or work in, or travel to, a location with a high risk of transmission are at increased risk of infection.

People residing or working in an area with a high risk of transmission (e.g., closed residential settings, humanitarian setting), people residing in or travelling to an area with community transmission, and people working in a health setting (including within health facilities and households) at any time within the 14 days prior to symptom onset are at higher risk of infection.[184]

People at risk of infection from severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) variants of concern include:[186]

- Those who have been in, or transited through, any countries with transmission of variants of concern (consult local guidance for lists of affected countries) and who develop symptoms within 10 days of departure or transit (or date of sampling for a positive SARS-CoV-2 test if asymptomatic)
- Those known to be infected with a variant of concern based on sequencing results, regardless of travel history
- Contacts of individuals described above.

**Older age**

Older people are at increased risk for infection and severe disease.[187]

In the UK, data from a cross-sectional study indicated that people aged 40 to 64 years are at greatest risk of infection, followed by patients 75 years and older, and then people aged 65 to 74 years.[188] The highest mortality rate was observed in patients 80 years and older.[189]

In the US, patients ≥65 years accounted for 31% of all cases, 45% of hospitalisations, 53% of intensive care unit admissions, and 80% of deaths early in the pandemic, with the highest incidence of severe outcomes in patients aged ≥85 years.[7]
While age is an independent risk factor, the risk in older people is also partly related to the likelihood that older adults are more likely to have comorbidities.

male sex

Males are at increased risk for infection and severe disease. [187]

In the UK, data from a cross-sectional study found that the adjusted odds of a positive test were greater in males (18.4%) compared with females (13.3%). [188]

It has been hypothesised that this may be due to the presence of androgens, a lower level of SARS-CoV-2 antibodies compared with females, women mounting a stronger immune response compared with men, or a higher prevalence of alcohol consumption and smoking; however, further research is required. [190]

ethnicity

People who belong to Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) groups are at increased risk of infection and severe disease. [191] [192]

In the UK, data from a cross-sectional study found that South Asian and Black patients had 1.93 and 1.47 the odds of suspected infection, respectively. [193] The average age of patients from ethnic minorities was significantly lower than that of White patients. [194] Ethnic minorities in the UK (including South Asian, East Asian, Black, and other ethnic minorities) admitted to hospital were more likely to be admitted to intensive care and require invasive mechanical ventilation compared with White patients, despite similar disease severity at admission and being younger with fewer comorbidities. [195]

In the US, age-adjusted data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (as of 23 January 2021) indicate that Hispanic or Latino people, non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native people, and non-Hispanic Black people have approximately 3.6, 3.2, and 2.9 times the rate of hospitalisations of non-Hispanic White people, respectively. [196] However, cohort studies in the US have found no difference in outcomes between non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic patients compared with White patients after adjusting for sociodemographic factors (e.g., age, sex, insurance) and comorbidities. These patients may have an increased risk of mortality and morbidity due to their disproportionate representation among hospitalisations. [197] [198] [199]

Racial disparities in outcomes may be partially attributed to higher rates of comorbidities in certain ethnic groups. [200]

residence in a long-term care facility

People in a long-term care facility are at increased risk for infection and severe disease. [117] [201]

In the UK, care home residents represented approximately one third of the total number of deaths in England and Wales during the first wave of the pandemic; other countries reported a similar experience. This was likely due to shortages in personal protective equipment, a vulnerable population, and a lack of testing. [202] A study across four nursing homes found that 26% of residents died over a 2-month period, with all-cause mortality increasing by 203% compared with previous years. Approximately 40% of residents tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, and of these, 43% were asymptomatic and 18% had atypical symptoms. [203]
In the US, the 30-day all-cause mortality rate was 21% in a cohort study of more than 5000 nursing home residents. Older age, male sex, and impaired cognitive and physical function were independently associated with mortality.[204]

**presence of comorbidities**

**People with comorbidities are at increased risk for severe disease, and the more comorbidities, the greater the risk.** [205] [206]

In the UK, the most common comorbidities reported in a cohort study of more than 20,000 hospitalised patients were cardiac disease (31%), uncomplicated diabetes (21%), non-asthmatic chronic pulmonary disease (18%), and chronic kidney disease (16%).[6]

In the US, approximately 91% of hospitalised adults had at least one reported underlying medical condition, with the most common being hypertension (56%), obesity (49%), metabolic disease (42%), and cardiovascular disease (33%). Approximately 53% of children had at least one reported underlying medical condition, with the most common being obesity (37%), neurological disease (13%), and asthma (12%).[196] It has been estimated that approximately 56% of adults, and 32% of young adults (ages 18-25 years), are at risk for severe disease because of the presence of at least one comorbidity.[207] [208]

Globally, hypertension (21%), obesity (18%), and diabetes (18%) were the most prevalent comorbidities. Cancer, chronic kidney disease, diabetes, and hypertension were independently associated with mortality. Chronic kidney disease was statistically the most prominent comorbidity leading to death.[209]

**cardiovascular disease**

**People with cardiovascular disease are at increased risk for severe disease.** [206]

Arrhythmias, coronary artery disease, and cardiovascular disease are significantly associated with intensive care unit admission. Heart failure, arrhythmias, coronary artery disease, and cardiovascular disease are also significantly associated with an increased risk of mortality.[210]

People with risk factors for cardiovascular disease (e.g., hypertension, diabetes) are also at increased risk for severe disease and mortality (see below).[211]

**diabetes**

**People with type 2 diabetes are at increased risk for severe disease.** People with type 1 diabetes or gestational diabetes may be at increased risk for severe disease; however, evidence is limited.[206]

Diabetes is associated with an increased risk for disease progression, intensive care admission, acute respiratory distress syndrome, need for invasive mechanical ventilation, and mortality.[212] [213]

In the UK, one third of all deaths in hospitalised patients occurred in patients with diabetes.[214] An analysis of more than 19,000 patients admitted to critical care over the entire first wave of the pandemic found that type 2 diabetes is associated with a 20% increase in mortality in patients with severe disease, independent of age, sex, ethnicity, obesity, or other major comorbidity.[215]
Risk factors for poor prognosis and higher mortality in patients with type 1 or type 2 diabetes include older age, male sex, non-White ethnicity, socioeconomic deprivation, renal impairment, history of stroke or heart failure, higher glycosylated haemoglobin (HbA1c) levels, higher body mass index, elevated C-reactive protein, diabetic ketoacidosis, and insulin use.[216] [217] [218] However, HbA1c levels were not associated with mortality in a large US cohort of hospitalised patients.[219] Patients with newly diagnosed diabetes have a higher risk of all-cause mortality compared with patients with known diabetes, hyperglycaemia, or normal glucose.[220] Metformin use has been associated with lower mortality.[221]

The poor prognosis in these patients is likely due to the syndromic nature of diabetes, with factors such as hyperglycaemia, older age, and the presence of comorbidities (e.g., obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease) all contributing to the increased risk.[222]

**Obesity**

*People with obesity are at increased risk for infection and severe disease.* [223]

People with obesity (≥30 kg/m²) or severe obesity (≥40 kg/m²) are at increased risk for severe disease. People who are overweight (25-30 kg/m²) may be at increased risk of severe disease; however, evidence is limited.[206] Evidence suggests a linear dose-response association between body mass index and disease severity and mortality.[224]

Obesity is associated with an increased risk for disease progression, intensive care unit admission, need for invasive mechanical ventilation, complications (e.g., venous thromboembolism and renal failure), and in-hospital mortality, especially among younger patients.[223] [225] [226]

**Chronic respiratory disease**

*People with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), including emphysema and chronic bronchitis, are at increased risk for severe disease.* People with moderate to severe asthma, or other chronic lung diseases (e.g., cystic fibrosis, idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis) may be at increased risk for severe disease; however, evidence is limited.[206]

COPD is associated with a more than 3-fold increased risk for severe disease and mortality.[227]

According to meta-analyses, asthma is not associated with an increased risk for infection, severe disease, worse prognosis, or a higher risk of intubation or mechanical ventilation. Clinical outcomes were similar between patients with asthma and patients without asthma. Patients with asthma had a lower risk of death compared with non-asthmatic patients.[228] [229]

People with obstructive sleep apnoea may be at increased risk for severe disease independent of age, sex, body mass index, and comorbidities; however, evidence is limited. Obstructive sleep apnoea has not been associated with an increased risk of infection.[230]

There are no data on whether paediatric respiratory diseases (including childhood asthma) are risk factors for infection or severity.[231] There is no clear evidence that people with asthma or COPD are at higher risk of infection.[232] [233]

**Chronic kidney disease**

*People with chronic kidney disease are at increased risk for severe disease, and may be at higher risk for infection.* [188] [206]
In the UK, data from a cross-sectional study found that the adjusted odds of a positive test were greater in patients with chronic kidney disease (32.9%) compared with those without (14.4%).[188]

Pre-existing chronic kidney disease is an independent risk factor for developing acute kidney injury as a complication.[234]

**pregnancy**

*Pregnant women are at increased risk for severe disease.* [206]

According to an analysis of approximately 400,000 women aged 15 to 44 years with symptomatic disease, pregnant women were more likely to be hospitalised, be admitted to the intensive care unit, receive invasive mechanical ventilation or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, and die compared with non-pregnant women.[25] Increased body mass index is a risk factor for severe disease in pregnant women.[235]

See the Complications section for more information on pregnancy-related complications.

**smoking**

*People who are current or former smokers are at increased risk for severe disease.* [206]

Current smokers have an increased risk for severe or critical disease. Patients with any smoking history have a significantly increased risk for severe or critical disease, disease progression, need for mechanical ventilation, and in-hospital mortality.[236] Smokers have double the mortality risk compared with non-smokers.[237] This may be due to increased airway expression of the angiotensin-converting enzyme-2 receptor in smokers.[238]

The World Health Organization has reviewed the available evidence and concluded that smoking is associated with increased severity of disease and death in hospitalised patients.[239]

**malignancy**

*People with cancer are at increased risk for infection and severe disease.* [206] [240]

A higher risk of infection is likely due to immunosuppressive treatments and/or recurrent hospital visits.[240]

Patients with cancer are 76% more likely to get severe disease compared with those without cancer.[241] They also have an increased risk for deterioration, intensive care unit admission, and all-cause mortality (particularly those with metastatic disease, haematological cancer, or lung cancer).[242] [243] The odds ratio of intensive care admission rates and mortality rates between cancer and non-cancer groups was 2.88 and 2.25, respectively.[244] The pooled in-hospital mortality risk in patients with cancer is 14.1%.[245]

Risk factors for mortality include male sex, older age, presence of one or more comorbidities, hypertension, COPD, and the presence of complications (e.g., acute respiratory distress syndrome, acute renal failure). Patients with haematological malignancies have an increased risk of mortality compared with those with solid tumours.[246] While active chemotherapy or chemotherapy within the last 30 days increased the risk of death, targeted therapies, immunotherapy, surgery, and radiotherapy did not appear to increase the risk for severe disease or death.[247] [248]
Children with cancer may be no more vulnerable to infection compared with children without cancer. Limited data show that the overall morbidity in paediatric patients with cancer is low, with only 5% requiring hospitalisation for symptoms.[249] Overall survival in children with cancer is very high (99.4%), and there was no significant difference in the risk of hospitalisation or intensive care unit admission between haematological malignancies and solid tumours in children.[250]

**solid organ transplant**

**People with an immunocompromised state from solid organ transplant are at increased risk for severe disease.** [206]

Solid organ transplant recipients are at increased risk for hospitalisation, intensive care unit admission, and mortality. However, the increased rate of hospitalisation may reflect a preferred management strategy of closer inpatient monitoring in these patients rather than being an indicator of disease severity. Overall mortality in solid organ transplant recipients was 20%. [251]

Hospitalisation and mortality rates in liver transplant recipients are disproportionately high compared with non-transplant patients regardless of age or time after transplant. Older age and diabetes are significant risk factors for death among these patients.[252]

**Down’s syndrome**

**People with Down’s syndrome are at increased risk for severe disease.** [206]

In the UK, a cohort study found a 4-fold increased risk for hospitalisation and a 10-fold increased risk for mortality in people with Down’s syndrome.[253] This may possibly be due to the presence of immune dysfunction, congenital heart disease, and pulmonary pathology.

**haemoglobin disorders**

**People with sickle cell disease are at increased risk for severe disease.** People with thalassaemia may be at increased risk for severe disease; however, evidence is limited.[206]

In the US, among 178 patients with sickle cell disease (mean patient age <40 years), 69% were hospitalised, 11% were admitted to intensive care, and 7% died.[254] Infection can cause acute chest syndrome in patients with sickle cell disease.[255] [256]

**hypertension**

**People with hypertension may be at increased risk for severe disease; however, evidence is limited.** [206]

Hypertension has been associated with increased poor composite outcome, including mortality, severe disease, acute respiratory distress syndrome, need for intensive care admission, and disease progression.[257] Patients with hypertension have a 2.98-fold higher risk of severe disease, a 1.82-fold higher risk of critical disease, and a 2.17 to 2.88-fold higher risk of fatality compared with patients without hypertension.[258] [259]

Initially, there was a concern that people on ACE inhibitors or angiotensin-II receptor antagonists may be at increased risk for infection or severe disease due to upregulation of ACE2 receptor expression.[260] However, high-certainty evidence suggests that use of these drugs is not associated with severe disease, and there is no association between the use of these medications and a positive SARS-CoV-2 test result among symptomatic patients.[261] [262]
**cerebrovascular disease**

People with cerebrovascular disease may be at increased risk for severe disease; however, evidence is limited. [206]

Patients with a history of cerebrovascular disease were more likely to progress to adverse outcomes compared with patients without a history of cerebrovascular disease.[263] Patients with pre-existing cerebrovascular disease had 2.67-fold higher odds of poor outcomes including intensive care admission, mechanical ventilation, and mortality.[264]

**dementia**

People with dementia may be at increased risk for infection and severe disease; however, evidence is limited. [206] [265]

In the UK, over one quarter of people who died with COVID-19 from March to June 2020 had dementia. Dementia and Alzheimer's disease was the most common main pre-existing health condition in deaths involving COVID-19 between March and June 2020.[266]

A retrospective case-control study of electronic patient health records in the US found that patients with dementia were at increased risk of infection compared with patients without dementia. They also had significantly worse outcomes (6-month hospitalisation risk and mortality risk) compared with patients with dementia but no COVID-19 and patients with COVID-19 but no dementia. The highest risk was seen in patients with vascular dementia.[267]

**chronic liver disease**

People with chronic liver disease, especially cirrhosis, may be at increased risk for severe disease; however, evidence is limited. [206]

Chronic liver disease has been associated with an increased risk for severe disease and mortality.[268] The 30-day mortality rate is higher in patients with cirrhosis, with the main causes of death being respiratory complications and sudden worsening of liver function leading to end-stage liver disease.[269]

People with metabolic dysfunction-associated fatty liver disease (nonalcoholic fatty liver disease) are at increased risk for severe disease. Disease severity has been associated with age <60 years and intermediate or high fibrosis-4 (FIB-4) scores.[270] [271] [272]

**immunosuppression**

People who are immunocompromised may be at increased risk for severe disease; however, evidence is limited. [206]

This includes people with a history of blood or bone marrow transplant, immune deficiencies, or prolonged use of corticosteroids or other immunosuppressant medications.

Glucocorticoid exposure of ≥10 mg/day (prednisolone) has been associated with a higher odds of hospitalisation in patients with rheumatological disease.[273] Patients treated with ciclosporin/tacrolimus also had an increased risk for hospitalisation; however, it was not clear whether the increased risk is related to the drug itself, the underlying condition for which the patient is treated, or other factors.[274]

Also see HIV infection and Autoimmune disease below.
**children with certain underlying conditions**

Children with certain underlying conditions may be at increased risk for severe disease; however, evidence is limited. [206]

These conditions include obesity, diabetes, asthma and chronic lung disease, immunosuppression, sickle cell disease, and chronic kidney disease. Children may also be at risk if they are medically complex; have serious genetic, neurological, or metabolic disorders; or have congenital heart disease.[206]

**Weak vitamin D deficiency**

People with vitamin D deficiency may be at higher risk for infection and severe disease; however, evidence is limited. [275] [276]

Observational and retrospective studies have found an association between vitamin D deficiency and a higher risk for infection.[277] [278] [279] [280] [281] [282]

A meta-analysis found that vitamin D deficiency increased the risk for hospitalisation and mortality, and patients with severe disease were more likely to have vitamin D deficiency compared with patients with mild disease.[283]

A cross-sectional study in 235 hospitalised patients in Iran found that patients who had sufficient serum vitamin D levels at admission, defined as serum 25(OH)D level ≥30 nanograms/mL, had significantly lower blood levels of C-reactive protein and a higher total blood lymphocyte count compared with those with insufficient vitamin D levels, suggesting that sufficient vitamin D levels improved immune function in these patients. Severe disease was less prevalent in patients with adequate vitamin D levels, and among those ages 40 years and over who died approximately 90% had insufficient vitamin D levels.[284]

**proton-pump inhibitor use**

People taking proton-pump inhibitors (PPIs) may be at increased risk for infection and severe disease; however, evidence is limited.

PPIs are known to increase the risk of infections due to hypochlorhydria. There is evidence of an independent, dose-response relationship between the use of antisecretory medications and COVID-19 positivity. People taking PPIs had significantly increased odds for reporting a positive COVID-19 test when compared with those not taking PPIs. People taking H2 antagonists were not at elevated risk.[285]

Patients taking PPIs may also be at increased risk for secondary infections, severe clinical outcomes, and death.[286] [287] Current or regular users of PPIs were more likely to have severe outcomes compared with non-PPI users. Also, current PPI users were more likely to be hospitalised for longer compared with non-PPI users, although this was not statistically significant. Past use of PPIs is not associated with increased susceptibility to infection or severe outcomes.[288]

**autoimmune disease**

People with autoimmune disease may be at higher risk for infection and severe disease; however, evidence is limited. [289]
Autoimmune disease has been associated with an increased risk of infection. However, clinical outcomes were not considerably worse when compared with people without autoimmune disease. Use of corticosteroids increased the risk of infection and severe outcomes, and use of combination disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) increased the risk of severe outcomes. DMARD monotherapy, particularly tumour necrosis factor inhibitors, reduced the risk of severe disease and mortality. Other factors associated with severe disease in this population include older age and the presence of comorbidities.\[289\]

In patients with multiple sclerosis, neurological disability, age, and obesity were risk factors for severe disease.\[290\]

In patients with inflammatory bowel disease, infection risk was comparable to the general population, and patient outcomes (hospitalisation, intensive care unit admission, and mortality) were worse in ulcerative colitis and patients on corticosteroids, thiopurines, aminosalicylates, or combination therapy. Outcomes were better in patients on biological agents.\[291\] \[292\] \[293\]

**HIV infection**

*People living with HIV may be at increased risk for mortality; however, evidence is limited and conflicting.*

It is still unclear whether HIV infection influences infection and disease course. A retrospective cohort study in the UK found that people with HIV appear to be at increased risk for mortality.\[294\]

A retrospective cohort study in New York found that while people with HIV do not appear to be at increased risk of infection, they are at increased risk for poor outcomes (mainly higher rates of severe disease requiring hospitalisation) compared with people living without diagnosed HIV infection. Hospitalisation risk increased with progression of HIV disease stage.\[295\]

Data from meta-analyses are conflicting. One meta-analysis found that HIV infection was not associated with composite poor outcome.\[296\] However, another meta-analysis found that people living with HIV infection had a moderately increased risk of mortality compared with people without HIV. People on tenofovir disoproxil-based regimens had a lower risk of poor outcomes.\[297\]

**dyslipidaemia**

*Dyslipidaemia appears to be associated with an increased risk for severe disease and mortality; however, evidence is limited.* \[298\] \[299\]

The association was stronger in males, older age, and those with hypertension.\[300\]

Initially there was a concern that people on statins may be at increased risk of infection or more severe disease, as statins have been shown to increase ACE2 expression in animals and may promote the activation of the inflammatory pathway in acute respiratory distress syndrome.\[260\] However, so far, studies do not support this hypothesis, and some studies have shown a protective effect.\[301\] \[302\] \[303\] \[304\]

**surgery**

*Surgical mortality and complications may be higher in patients with COVID-19 compared with patients without COVID-19.* \[305\]
A retrospective study of 34 patients in China who underwent elective surgeries during the incubation period of COVID-19 found that all patients developed pneumonia after surgery. Approximately 44% of these patients required admission to the intensive care unit, and 20% died.[306]

Postoperative pulmonary complications occur in half of patients with perioperative SARS-CoV-2 infection, and are associated with higher mortality, particularly in men and those aged 70 years and over.[307]

**blood groups A and B**

**People with blood group A may be at increased risk for infection and mortality, and people with blood group B may be at increased risk for infection; however, evidence is limited.**[308]

There is no evidence for an association between blood group AB and the risk of infection. Blood group O appears to be protective against infection. People who are Rh-positive were more vulnerable to infection compared with those who were Rh-negative.[308]

A genome-wide association study found that patients with blood group A are at 45% increased risk of respiratory failure compared with other blood groups. It also found a protective effect in blood group O. Two chromosomal loci were associated with respiratory failure, and one of these coincided with the ABO blood group locus.[183]

**gut dysbiosis**

There is limited evidence that gut microbiota dysfunction may be implicated in the pathogenesis of COVID-19.

Patients appear to have a depletion of beneficial commensals (e.g., *Eubacterium ventriosum*, *Eubacterium rectale*, *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii*, *Roseburia* and Lachnospiraceae taxa) and an overgrowth of opportunistic pathogens (e.g., *Clostridium hathewayi*, *Actinomyces viscosus*, *Bacteroides nordii*) during hospitalisation.[309] [310] [311] Associations between gut microbiota composition, levels of cytokines, and inflammatory markers in patients with COVID-19 suggest that the gut microbiome is involved in disease severity, possibly via modulating host immune responses. Gut dysbiosis after disease resolution may contribute to persistent symptoms.[312]

**environmental factors**

**Climate and latitude**: limited evidence suggests that cold and dry conditions and higher latitude may increase transmission, and warm and humid conditions may reduce the rate of infections; however, evidence is conflicting and is not sufficient to prove causation.[313] [314] [315] [316] [317] [318] [319]

**Air pollution**: limited evidence suggests an association between exposure to ambient air pollution and COVID-19; however, evidence is not sufficient to prove causation.[320] [321] [322] [323]

**Residence in urban or deprived areas**: limited evidence suggests that the adjusted odds of a positive test were greater in people living in urban areas (26.2%) compared with people living in rural areas (5.6%), and in people living in more deprived areas (29.5%) compared with people living in less deprived areas (7.7%).[188]
Aetiology

Virology

- Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is a previously unknown betacoronavirus that was discovered in bronchoalveolar lavage samples taken from clusters of patients who presented with pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, in December 2019.[35]
- Coronaviruses are a large family of enveloped RNA viruses, some of which cause illness in people (e.g., common cold, severe acute respiratory syndrome [SARS], Middle East respiratory syndrome [MERS]), and others that circulate among mammals and birds. Rarely, animal coronaviruses can spread to humans and subsequently spread between people, as was the case with SARS and MERS.
- SARS-CoV-2 belongs to the *Sarbecovirus* subgenus of the *Coronaviridae* family, and is the seventh coronavirus known to infect humans. The virus has been found to be similar to SARS-like coronaviruses from bats, but it is distinct from SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV.[36] [37] The full genome has been determined and published in GenBank. [GenBank]

Illustration revealing ultrastructural morphology exhibited by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) when viewed with electron microscopically

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Emerging SARS-CoV-2 variants

- All viruses, including SARS-CoV-2, change over time. Over 250,000 variants of the virus have been sequenced by the COVID-19 Genomics UK Consortium (COG-UK) as of 17 February 2021. [COG-UK: data]
- Noteworthy SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern (VOC) include the following.
  - **VOC 202012/01 (B.1.1.7 lineage)**: first identified in Kent, South East of England in September 2020, and reported to the World Health Organization in December 2020. The origin is unclear. It
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is now the dominant variant in the UK. The variant has been reported in more than 90 countries, and community transmission has been reported in a small number of these countries. There is evidence that suggests this variant may be more transmissible. Secondary attack rates have been reported to be higher if the index case has this variant. The reported secondary attack rate is 10% in contacts of people without the variant, and 10% to 13% in contacts of people with the variant, across all regions and age groups (based on data from 30 November 2020 to 10 January 2021). Estimated secondary attack rates are 10% to 55% higher than wild-type virus for most regions and age groups.[38] However, secondary attack rates for non-variant forms are known to vary quite widely (see Secondary attack rate below). There is a possibility that infection with this variant is associated with an increased risk of disease severity, hospitalisation, and death compared with other variants.[39] There is consistent evidence of cross-neutralising activity in convalescent sera (i.e., sera from individuals who have been infected with B1.1.7 shows neutralising activity against virus from other lineages, and the converse is also true).[38]

The variant has mutations that have been associated with attenuation in other variants.[40]

- **VOC 202102/02 (B.1.1.7 cluster with E484K mutation)**: a small number of B.1.1.7 sequences have acquired the spike protein mutation E484K. A small cluster of cases has been reported in South West England. No hospitalisations or deaths have been reported with this variant. No international cases have been reported.[38]

- **VOC 202012/02 (B.1.351 lineage)**: first detected in Nelson Mandela Bay, South Africa in October 2020. The variant has been reported in at least 40 countries, including the UK. The variant has similar spike protein mutations to VOC 202012/01. Sequence analysis reveals that the N501Y mutation reported in the UK and South Africa originated independently. These mutations may affect its transmissibility and antigenic profile; however, cases, hospitalisations, and deaths are currently decreasing in South Africa.[38]

- **VOC 202101/02 (P.1 lineage)**: a descendant of the B.1.1.28 lineage first detected in Japan in travellers from Brazil. The variant contains mutations that may affect its transmissibility and antigenic profile; however, there is insufficient evidence to confirm this. It has been reported in 11 countries, but has not been detected in the UK as yet.[38]

- **B.1.1.207 lineage**: two sequences were first identified in Nigeria, although it is unknown where the variant first emerged. These sequences share one non-synonymous mutation in the spike protein in common with the B.1.1.7 lineage, but do not share any of the other unique mutations of the B.1.1.7 lineage. There is currently no evidence to suggest that this variant has any impact on disease transmission or severity.[41]

- **Cluster 5 variant**: detected in people in Denmark and associated with transmission from farmed minks. The clinical implications of this new variant are not yet well understood; however, mutations in the spike protein have been reported. No new human cases of the cluster 5 variant have been reported in Denmark since 20 November 2020, and the variant is no longer circulating in humans. All mink on affected mink farms, and farms within an assigned zone, were culled. Seven other countries have reported SARS-CoV-2 in farmed minks (Lithuania, Greece, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the US).[42][43]

  - Further investigations are required to more fully understand the impact of these variants.
  - In a global study of over 12,000 mutations of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (which excluded the variants above), there was no evidence to suggest that any of the identified SARS-CoV-2 variants were associated with increased transmissibility.[44]

**Origin of virus**
• A majority of patients in the initial stages of this outbreak reported a link to the Huanan South China Seafood Market, a live animal or ‘wet’ market, suggesting a zoonotic origin of the virus.[45] [46] [47] An initial assessment of the transmission dynamics in the first 425 confirmed cases found that 55% of cases before 1 January 2020 were linked to the market, whereas only 8.6% of cases after this date were linked to the market. This suggests that person-to-person spread was occurring among close contacts since the middle of December 2019.[47]

• Some studies suggest that SARS-CoV-2 may be a recombinant virus between a bat coronavirus and an origin-unknown coronavirus.[36] [37] [48] [49] Pangolins and minks have been suggested as possible intermediate hosts.[50] [51] [52] [53] However, there is currently no evidence to demonstrate the possible route of transmission from a bat reservoir to human through one or several intermediary animal species.[54] Further research is required to determine the origin of SARS-CoV-2.

Transmission dynamics

• **Respiratory transmission** is the dominant mode of transmission, with proximity and ventilation being the key determinants of transmission risk.[55] Available evidence suggests that transmission between people occurs primarily through direct, indirect, or close contact with infected people through infected secretions such as saliva and respiratory secretions, or through their respiratory droplets, which are expelled when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, or sings.[56]

• **Airborne transmission** can occur in healthcare settings during aerosol-generating procedures. There are also some outbreak reports that suggest aerosol transmission is possible in the community under certain conditions; however, these reports relate to enclosed indoor crowded spaces with poor ventilation where the infected person may have been breathing heavily (e.g., restaurants, choir practice, fitness classes). A detailed investigation of these clusters suggests that droplet and fomite transmission could also explain the transmission in these reports.[56] [57] While the air close to, and distant from, patients has been found to frequently be contaminated with SARS-CoV-2 RNA, few of these samples contained viable virus.[58]

• **Fomite transmission** (from direct contact with fomites) may be possible, but there is currently no conclusive evidence for this mode of transmission. In the few cases where fomite transmission has been presumed, respiratory transmission has not been completely excluded.[55] The virus has been found to be more stable on plastic and stainless steel (up to 72 hours) compared with copper (up to 4 hours) and cardboard (up to 24 hours) under experimental conditions, but this does not reflect real-life conditions.[59] In healthcare settings, the virus is widely distributed in the air and on object surfaces in both general wards and intensive care units.[60] However, no virus has been cultured from these samples indicating that the deposition may reflect non-viable viral RNA.[61] [62] [63]

• **Faecal-oral transmission** (or respiratory transmission through aerosolised faeces) may be possible, but there is only limited circumstantial evidence to support this mode of transmission.[55] The pooled detection rate of faecal SARS-CoV-2 RNA in patients with COVID-19 is approximately 51%, with 64% of samples remaining positive for a mean of 12.5 days (up to 33 days maximum) after respiratory samples became negative.[64]

• **Transmission via other body fluids** (including sexual transmission or bloodborne transmission) has not been reported.[55] While the virus has been detected in blood, cerebrospinal fluid, pericardial fluid, pleural fluid, urine, semen, saliva, ocular tissue including the cornea, tears, and conjunctival secretions, as well as in the middle ear and mastoid, the presence of virus or viral components does not equate with infectivity.[65] [66] [67] [68] [69] [70] [71] [72] [73] [74] [75] [76] [77] SARS-CoV-2 is not sexually transmitted, but may have an effect on male fertility, although this is yet to be confirmed.[78]

• **Vertical transmission** occurs rarely and transplacental transmission has been documented. There is limited evidence on the extent of vertical transmission and its timing.[79] Overall, 6.3% of infants
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born to mothers with COVID-19 tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 at birth. Transmission was reported in both preterm and full-term infants. There is also evidence for antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 among infants born to mothers with COVID-19 who tested negative for SARS-CoV-2.[80] The rate of infection appears to be no greater when the baby is born vaginally, breastfed, or allowed contact with the mother.[81] Viral fragments have been detected in breast milk; however, this finding is uncommon and, when it occurs, has been associated with mild symptoms in infants. Anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies are more prevalent in breast milk compared with viral fragments.[82] Vertical transmission is unlikely to occur if correct hygiene precautions are taken.[83]

• **Nosocomial transmission** was reported in 44% of patients in one systematic review; however, this review was limited to case series conducted early in the outbreak in Wuhan before the institution of appropriate infection prevention and control measures.[84] Hospital-acquired infections (defined as patients diagnosed more than 7 days after hospital admission) accounted for approximately 17% of infections in the NHS England as of 26 October 2020, and rates have been as high as 25% in some areas.[85] Studies of healthcare workers exposed to index cases (not in the presence of aerosol-generating procedures) found little to no nosocomial transmission when contact and droplet precautions were used.[56] [86]

**Transmission dynamics in relation to symptoms**

• **Symptomatic transmission**
  
  - Transmission appears to mainly be spread via droplets and close contact with infected symptomatic cases. Transmissibility depends on the amount of viable virus being shed and expelled by a person (viral load is highest just before or around the time of symptom onset and during the first 5-7 days of illness), the type of contact, the setting, and what infection prevention and control measures are in place.[56] [87]

• **Presymptomatic transmission**
  
  - Transmission may occur during the incubation period, usually 1 to 3 days before symptom onset.[87]
  - Presymptomatic transmission was reported in 12.6% of cases in China, and 6.4% of cases in Singapore.[88] [89]
  - People without symptoms may be presymptomatic, or they may remain persistently asymptomatic.

• **Asymptomatic transmission**
  
  - Transmission from asymptomatic cases (laboratory-confirmed cases who never develop symptoms) has been reported; however, most of the evidence is based on early data from China and has limitations (e.g., small number of cases, cases may have been presymptomatic).[90] [91] [92] [93] [94] [95] [96] The World Health Organization states that asymptomatic cases are not the major driver of the overall epidemic dynamics.[97] Numerous studies have reported no evidence of asymptomatic transmission from carriers of SARS-CoV-2.[98] [99] [100] In a post-lockdown screening study in nearly 10 million residents in Wuhan, there were no positive tests among 1174 close contacts of asymptomatic cases. In addition to this, virus culture was carried out on samples from asymptomatic positive cases and all cultures were negative, indicating that asymptomatic positive cases in the study were not infectious.[101]
  - Estimating the prevalence of asymptomatic cases in the population is difficult. A meta-analysis of over 50,000 people found that 15.6% of confirmed cases were asymptomatic at the time of
testing (range 2% to 75%), and nearly half developed symptoms later.\[102\] The overall estimate of the proportion of people who become infected and remain asymptomatic throughout infection has been estimated to be 17% to 33%.\[103\] \[104\] \[105\]

- Healthcare workers may play a role in asymptomatic transmission. About 7.6% of healthcare workers who worked in hospital units with infected patients tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies; however, only 58% of these workers reported prior symptoms.\[106\] A cross-sectional study of nearly 2800 healthcare workers found that 5.4% of COVID-19-facing asymptomatic healthcare workers tested positive, compared with 0.6% of non-COVID-19-facing asymptomatic healthcare workers.\[107\]

- Children are more likely to be asymptomatic.\[102\] The pooled proportion of asymptomatic cases in children was thought to be significant (around 40%).\[108\] \[109\] However, recent studies have found that the rate of asymptomatic infection in children was very low (1% compared with 9% in adults in one study, and 0.6% compared with 1.8% in adults in another study), indicating that children appear not to be particular drivers of the pandemic.\[110\] \[111\]

Superspreading events

- Superspreading events have been reported. These events are associated with explosive growth early in an outbreak and sustained transmission in later stages.\[112\]
- Reported events include church/religious gatherings, family or social gatherings, weddings, choir practices, overnight youth camps or high school retreats, fitness classes, indoor recreational sporting activities, business conferences, and working in call centres.\[55\] \[113\] \[114\] \[115\] \[116\] Widespread transmission has also been reported in long-term care facilities, homeless shelters, prisons, immigration detention centres, and meat and poultry processing facilities, as well as on board cruise ships.\[117\] \[118\] \[119\] \[120\] \[121\] \[122\] \[123\] \[124\] \[125\]

- Limited transmission has been reported in childcare, school, and university settings, and infected cases may transmit the infection to their household members.\[126\] \[127\] \[128\] There is limited high-quality evidence to quantify the extent of transmission in schools, or to compare it with community transmission. However, emerging evidence suggests a lower overall infection attack rate in students (0.15%) compared with school staff (0.7%).\[129\]

- Some individuals are supershedders of virus, but the reasons underlying superspreader events are often more complex than just excess virus shedding and can include a variety of behavioural, host, and environmental factors.\[130\]

Viral transmission factors

- Incubation period
  - The incubation period is estimated to be between 1 and 14 days, with a median of 5 to 7 days.\[2\] \[131\] Viable virus is relatively short lived; infectiousness peaks around 1 day before symptom onset and declines within 7 days.\[55\]
  - The pooled mean incubation period is 9.6 days in children.\[10\]

- Reproduction number (R#)
  - Reports suggest that the reproduction number, the number of people who acquire the infection from an infected person, is estimated to be 2.2 to 3.3. However, there is very high heterogeneity across studies and the number varies between countries.\[47\] \[132\] \[133\] \[134\] The Centers
for Disease Control and Prevention gives a current best estimate of 2.5 (as of 10 September 2020).[135]

- The R₀ decreases when public health measures (e.g., social distancing) are put in place.[136]

**Serial interval**

- The time between the start of symptoms in the primary patient and the onset of symptoms in the patient being infected in a chain of transmission has been estimated to be approximately 5.45 days (range 4.2 to 6.7 days).[137]

**Secondary attack rate**

- The secondary attack rate is the proportion of people exposed to an index (or primary) case that go on to develop the disease as a result of the exposure.
- The pooled secondary attack rate among all close contacts of an index case has been estimated to be 7%.[138]
- The secondary attack rate differs between contact settings. More familiar prolonged contact increases the potential for transmission. Pooled estimates of the secondary attack rate range from 1.2% to 5.9% in social settings (depending on level of contact and whether contact is with strangers or family and friends), 1.9% in workplaces (based on limited data), 3.6% in healthcare facilities, and 21.1% for household settings (increases with exposure >5 days).[139]
- Another systematic review and meta-analysis of household transmission only estimates the pooled household secondary attack rate to be slightly lower at 16.6%. The rate is higher for symptomatic index cases (18%) compared with asymptomatic cases (0.7%), and adults have a higher susceptibility to infection compared with children. Spouses of the index case are more likely to be infected compared with other household members.[140]
- The secondary attack rate increases with the severity of the index case (i.e., 0.3% for asymptomatic cases to 6.2% for severe/critical cases) according to a study of 3410 close contacts of 391 index cases.[97]
- The secondary attack rate for close contacts of presymptomatic people has been estimated to be approximately 7%, compared with 1% in asymptomatic people and 6% in symptomatic people.[141]
- Children aged <5 years had lower secondary attack rates compared with older children, and the risk of infection was higher if the household index case was the mother.[142] The secondary attack rate was 1.2% in children in a childcare setting or school.[143]
- Secondary attack rates for SARS-CoV-2 variants may differ (see Emerging SARS-CoV-2 variants above).

**Viral load**

- Viral load is highest in the upper respiratory tract (nasopharynx and oropharynx) early in the course of infection (usually peaks in the first week of illness), and then increases in the lower respiratory tract (sputum). Viral load decreases after symptom onset. Patients with severe disease have higher viral loads compared with those with mild disease. Viral load in the upper respiratory tract is comparable in asymptomatic and symptomatic patients; however, most studies demonstrate faster viral clearance among asymptomatic people compared with symptomatic people.[144]
- Viral load appears to be a leading driver of virus transmission. In one cohort study, the secondary attack rate was 17% among 753 contacts of index cases, with a variation from
12% when the index case had a viral load lower than $1 \times 10^6$ copies/mL to 24% when the index case had a viral load of $1 \times 10^{10}$ copies/mL or higher (in nasopharyngeal swabs). Higher viral loads in swabs of asymptomatic contacts were associated with a higher risk of developing symptomatic disease, and these contacts had shorter incubation periods than those with a lower viral load.[145]

- **Viral shedding**

  - The mean duration of shedding was 17 days in the upper respiratory tract, 14.6 days in the lower respiratory tract, 17.2 days in stool, and 16.6 days in serum samples. The maximum duration of shedding was 83 days in the upper respiratory tract, 59 days in the lower respiratory tract, 126 days in stool, and 60 days in serum samples. However, no live virus was detected beyond day 9 of symptoms, despite persistently high viral loads. Duration of viral shedding was longer in symptomatic patients compared with asymptomatic patients, and in patients with severe illness compared with those with non-severe illness.[144]

  - The period of infectiousness is far shorter than the duration of detectable viral shedding. No viable virus has been isolated in patients with mild or moderate disease after 10 days of symptoms, or after 20 days in those with severe or critical disease, despite ongoing viral shedding. Data about the dynamics of viral shedding in people with persistent asymptomatic infection are inconsistent.[55] There is no convincing evidence that duration of viral shedding correlates with duration of infectivity.[146]

  - Factors associated with prolonged viral shedding include male sex, older age, comorbid hypertension, delayed admission to hospital after symptom onset or severe illness on admission, and use of invasive mechanical ventilation or corticosteroids.[147] Immunocompromised patients may shed for at least 2 months.[148]

### Pathophysiology

The pathophysiology is not yet fully understood; however, details are emerging.[149]
Angiotensin-converting enzyme-2 (ACE2) receptor

- Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) binds to the ACE2 receptor in humans, which suggests a similar pathogenesis to SARS.\[37\] [150]
- A unique structural feature of the spike glycoprotein receptor-binding domain of SARS-CoV-2 (which is responsible for the entry of the virus into host cells) confers potentially higher binding affinity for ACE2 on host cells compared with SARS-CoV-1.\[151\] This furin-like cleavage site does not exist in other SARS-like coronaviruses.\[152\] The binding energy between the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein and ACE2 was highest for humans out of all species tested, suggesting that the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein is uniquely evolved to bind to and infect human cells expressing ACE2.\[153\]
- Mechanistic evidence from other coronaviruses suggests that SARS-CoV-2 may downregulate ACE2, leading to a toxic overaccumulation of plasma angiotensin-II, which may induce acute respiratory distress syndrome and fulminant myocarditis.\[154\] [155]
- Based on an analysis of single-cell RNA sequencing datasets derived from major human physiological systems, the organs considered more vulnerable to SARS-CoV-2 infection due to their ACE2 expression levels include the lungs, heart, oesophagus, kidneys, bladder, and ileum.\[156\] This may explain the extrapulmonary manifestations associated with infection. ACE2 expression has also been identified in the diaphragm, which may lead to diaphragm fibrosis and myopathy.\[157\]
• Lower expression of ACE2 in the nasal epithelium of children ages <10 years compared with adults may explain why COVID-19 is less prevalent in children; however, further research on this is required.[158]

Transmembrane protease serine 2 (TMPRSS2)

• SARS-CoV-2 uses host TMPRSS2 for S protein priming and fusion of viral and host cell membranes.[159]
• Higher expression of TMPRSS2 has been noted in the nasal epithelium of Black people compared with Asian people, Latin people, White people, and people of mixed race/ethnicity, which may be a contributing factor to the higher burden of infection among Black people.[160]

Autopsy studies

• **Pulmonary**: autopsy studies have revealed that patients who died of respiratory failure had evidence of exudative diffuse alveolar damage with massive capillary congestion, often accompanied by microthrombi. Hyaline membrane formation and pneumocyte atypical hyperplasia are common. Pulmonary artery obstruction by thrombotic material at both the macroscopic and microscopic levels has been identified. Patients also had signs of generalised thrombotic microangiopathy. Severe endothelial injury associated with the presence of intracellular virus and disrupted cell membranes has been noted. Other findings include bronchopneumonia, pulmonary embolism, alveolar haemorrhage, and vasculitis. Significant new blood vessel growth through intussusceptive angiogenesis distinguishes the pulmonary pathology of COVID-19 from severe influenza infection.[161] [162] [163] [164] [165] [166] Some patients with severe disease may develop fibrotic lung disease for which lung transplantation may be the only treatment option.[167]

• **Neurological**: histopathological examination of brain specimens showed hypoxic changes but no encephalitis or other specific brain changes due to the virus in one autopsy study. The virus was detected at low levels in brain tissue.[168] Another study found mild neuropathological changes, with pronounced neuroinflammatory changes in the brainstem being the most common finding.[169]

• **Cardiac**: SARS-CoV-2 has been frequently detected in the myocardium in autopsy studies. While cardiac pathologic findings are prevalent, acute myocarditis is uncommon. The most frequent findings were cardiac dilatation, myocardial ischaemia, and thrombosis.[170] The virus, along with inflammatory changes, has been reported in the cardiac tissue of a child with paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome.[171]

• **Immunology**: the mechanisms contributing to increased thrombosis involve extensive cross-talk between the immune system and haemostasis.[172] Evaluation of immune infiltrate has revealed a notable presence of aggregated neutrophils in the lungs and several other organs. Neutrophilic plugs, composed of neutrophils with neutrophil extracellular traps (NETs) or as aggregates of NETs and platelets, were present in the heart, kidney, liver, and brain. NETs may therefore play a role in coagulopathy associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection. The disproportionate presence of aggregate neutrophils and NETs in comparison with the sporadic presence of virus suggests an autonomous maladaptive immune response.[173] NETs appear to play a role in the pathogenesis of ST-elevation myocardial infarction in COVID-19 patients based on a small case series of patients with COVID-19 and myocardial infarction.[174]

• **Hepatic**: a high prevalence of hepatic steatosis, congestion of hepatic sinuses, vascular thrombosis, and fibrosis have been noted, along with portal and lobular inflammation and Kupffer cell hyperplasia or proliferation.[175]
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Theory

Other: other novel findings at autopsy include pancreatitis, pericarditis, adrenal microinfarction, secondary disseminated mucormycosis, and brain microglial activation.[176]

Endothelial dysfunction

There is a hypothesis that COVID-19 is a disease of the endothelium.[177] [178] [179] Endotheliopathy and platelet activation appear to be important features of COVID-19 in hospitalised patients and are likely to be associated with coagulopathy, critical illness, and death.[180]

Hyperviscosity has been reported in patients. It is known to damage the endothelium, and is a known risk factor for thrombosis. The potential link between hyperviscosity and thrombotic complications warrants further investigation.[181]

Genetic factors

Genetic factors are thought to play a role. In a case series of four male patients with severe disease, rare putative loss-of-function variants of X-chromosomal TLR7 were identified, and this was associated with impairment of interferon responses.[182]

A novel susceptibility locus has been detected at a chromosome 3p21.31 gene cluster in patients with respiratory failure, which may confirm the involvement of the ABO blood-group system.[183]

Classification


Mild illness

Symptomatic patients meeting the case definition for COVID-19 without evidence of hypoxia or pneumonia.

Common symptoms include fever, cough, fatigue, anorexia, dyspnoea, and myalgia. Other non-specific symptoms include sore throat, nasal congestion, headache, diarrhoea, nausea/vomiting, and loss of smell/taste. Additional neurological manifestations reported include dizziness, agitation, weakness, seizures, or findings suggestive of stroke. Children may not report fever or cough as frequently as adults.

Older people and immunosuppressed people may present with atypical symptoms (e.g., fatigue, reduced alertness, reduced mobility, diarrhoea, loss of appetite, delirium, absence of fever).

Symptoms due to physiological adaptations of pregnancy or adverse pregnancy events (e.g., dyspnoea, fever, gastrointestinal symptoms, fatigue) or other diseases (e.g., malaria) may overlap with COVID-19 symptoms.

Moderate disease

Adolescent or adult: clinical signs of pneumonia (i.e., fever, cough, dyspnoea, fast breathing) but no signs of severe pneumonia, including blood oxygen saturation levels (SpO₂) ≥90% on room air.

Children: clinical signs of non-severe pneumonia (i.e., cough or difficulty breathing plus fast breathing and/or chest indrawing) and no signs of severe pneumonia. Fast breathing is defined as:

- <2 months of age: ≥60 breaths/minute
- 2-11 months of age: ≥50 breaths/minute
- 1-5 years years of age: ≥40 breaths/minute.
• While the diagnosis can be made on clinical grounds, chest imaging may assist in diagnosis and identify or exclude pulmonary complications.

Severe disease

• Adolescent or adult: clinical signs of pneumonia (i.e., fever, cough, dyspnoea, fast breathing) plus one of the following:
  • Respiratory rate >30 breaths/minute
  • Severe respiratory distress
  • SpO₂ <90% on room air.
• Children: clinical signs of pneumonia (i.e., cough or difficulty in breathing) plus at least one of the following:
  • Central cyanosis or SpO₂ <90%
  • Severe respiratory distress (e.g., fast breathing, grunting, very severe chest indrawing)
  • General danger signs: inability to breastfeed or drink, lethargy or unconsciousness, or convulsions
  • Fast breathing (<2 months: ≥60 breaths per minute; 2-11 months: ≥50 breaths per minute; 1-5 years: ≥40 breaths per minute).

• While the diagnosis can be made on clinical grounds, chest imaging may assist in diagnosis and identify or exclude pulmonary complications.

Critical disease

• Presence of acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), sepsis, septic shock, acute thrombosis, or multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children.

National Institutes of Health: clinical classification of COVID-19[3]

Asymptomatic or presymptomatic infection

• People who test positive for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) using a virological test but have no symptoms consistent with COVID-19.

Mild illness

• People who have any of various signs and symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat, malaise, headache, muscle pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, loss of taste and smell) without shortness of breath, dyspnoea, or abnormal chest imaging.

Moderate illness

• People who have evidence of lower respiratory disease by clinical assessment or imaging and an oxygen saturation (SpO₂) ≥94% on room air at sea level.

Severe illness

• People who have respiratory frequency >30 breaths per minute, SpO₂ <94% on room air at sea level, ratio of arterial partial pressure of oxygen to fraction of inspired oxygen (PaO₂/FiO₂) <300 mmHg, or lung infiltrates >50%.
Critical illness

- People who have respiratory failure, septic shock, and/or multiple organ dysfunction.

Persistent symptoms or organ dysfunction after acute COVID-19

- People who experience persistent symptoms and/or organ dysfunction after acute disease. Also known as post-acute COVID-19 syndrome or long COVID. See the Complications section for more information.

Case history

Case history #1

A 61-year-old man presents to hospital with fever, dry cough, and difficulty breathing. He also reports feeling very tired and unwell. He has a history of hypertension, which is controlled with enalapril. On examination, his pulse is 120 bpm, his temperature is 38.7°C (101.6°F), and his oxygen saturation is 88%. He appears acutely ill. He is admitted to hospital in an isolation room and is started on oxygen, intravenous fluids, and empirical antibiotics. Blood and sputum cultures are ordered. Chest x-ray shows bilateral lung infiltrates, and computed tomography of the chest reveals multiple bilateral lobular and subsegmental areas of ground-glass opacity. A nasopharyngeal swab is sent for real-time reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction testing, and the result comes back positive for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) the next day. Empirical antibiotics are stopped based on microbiology results, and the patient is started on dexamethasone.

Case history #2

A 26-year-old woman presents at her local COVID-19 testing clinic with symptoms of a sore throat and loss of taste. She denies having a fever, and has not knowingly been in contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19. After being tested, she is advised to go home, self-isolate until her test results are sent to her via text message, and call her doctor if her symptoms get worse. She receives a text message later that day confirming that her test is positive for SARS-CoV-2, and that she must self-isolate according to her local public health recommendations.

Other presentations

See the [Diagnosis] section for more information on other presentations.
Recommendations

Key Recommendations

**Isolate all suspected or confirmed cases immediately.** Triage patients with a standardised triage tool and evaluate the severity of disease. Follow local infection prevention and control guidelines.[2]

**Have a high index of clinical suspicion in all patients who present with fever and/or acute respiratory illness.** People with a history of residence/work/travel in a location with a high risk of transmission or community transmission and contacts of probable and confirmed cases are at higher risk of infection.[184]

**Suspect the diagnosis in patients with a new continuous cough, fever, or altered sense of taste or smell.**[403] Patients may also present with symptoms including dyspnoea, fatigue, myalgia/arthritis, sore throat, headache, nasal congestion or rhinorrhea, sputum production, chest tightness, or gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g., nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea).[404]

**Order a real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) to confirm the diagnosis.** Upper and lower respiratory specimens are preferred. Serological testing may be useful in some settings.[405] Results should be interpreted in the context of the pretest probability of disease.

**Be on high alert for children and adolescents with acute gastrointestinal symptoms and signs of cardiac inflammation.** Evidence so far suggests a milder or asymptomatic course of disease in children.[406] However, a rare multisystem inflammatory condition with some features similar to those of Kawasaki disease and toxic shock syndrome has been temporally associated with COVID-19 in children and adolescents.[407]

**Order the following laboratory investigations in hospitalised patients:** full blood count, comprehensive metabolic panel, arterial blood gas, blood glucose level, coagulation screen, inflammatory markers, cardiac biomarkers, serum creatine kinase, and blood and sputum cultures for other pathogens. Pulse oximetry may reveal low oxygen saturation.

**Prioritise a chest x-ray in patients who are seriously ill with suspected pneumonia.** Consider a computed tomography scan of the chest if chest x-ray is uncertain or normal.[408] Consult local guidelines.

Full Recommendations

Introduction

**COVID-19 is a notifiable disease.** Report all suspected or confirmed cases to your local health authorities.

Early recognition and rapid diagnosis are essential to prevent transmission and provide supportive care in a timely manner. Have a high index of clinical suspicion for COVID-19 in all patients who present with fever and/or acute respiratory illness; however, be aware that some patients may not present with signs or symptoms of a febrile respiratory illness.

COVID-19 care pathways should be established at local, regional, and national levels for people with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. Screen patients at the first point of contact within the health system based on case definitions and an assessment of symptoms, and enter suspected or confirmed cases into the pathway. Suspected cases should remain in the pathway until proven negative. Immediately isolate all suspected and confirmed cases and implement local infection prevention and control procedures. Triage patients with a standardised triage tool and evaluate the patient to assess the severity of disease. Use clinical judgement, including consideration of the patient’s values and preferences and local and national policy if available, to guide management decisions including admission to hospital and to the intensive care unit, rather than currently available prediction models for prognosis.[2]
**History**

Take a detailed history to ascertain the level of risk for COVID-19 and assess the possibility of other causes, including a travel history and an assessment of risk factors.

**Suspect the diagnosis in :**[184]

- People residing or working in an area with a high risk of transmission (e.g., closed residential settings, humanitarian setting), people residing in or travelling to an area with community transmission, and people working in a health setting (including within health facilities and households) at any time within the 14 days prior to symptom onset
- People who have had contact with a probable or confirmed case. A contact is a person who has experienced any one of the following exposures during the 2 days before and the 14 days after the onset of symptoms of a probable or confirmed case:
  - Face-to-face contact with a probable or confirmed case within 1 metre (3 feet) and for at least 15 minutes
  - Direct physical contact with a probable or confirmed case
  - Direct care for a patient with probable or confirmed COVID-19 without using recommended personal protective equipment
  - Other situations as indicated by local risk assessments.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines a close contact as someone who has been within 2 metres (6 feet) of an infected person for at least 15 minutes over a 24-hour period, beginning 2 days before symptom onset (or 2 days before testing in asymptomatic patients).[185]

Ask anyone seeking routine or emergency care, regardless of whether they have symptoms, about recent travel to countries where there is transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) variants of concern (consult local guidance for current list of countries), or whether they are a contact of a returning traveller from these countries.[186]

**Clinical presentation in adults**

Approximately 15% of patients present with the symptom triad of fever, cough, and dyspnoea, and 90% present with more than one symptom.[46] Some patients may be minimally symptomatic or asymptomatic, while others may present with severe pneumonia or complications such as acute respiratory syndrome, septic shock, acute myocardial infarction, venous thromboembolism, or multi-organ failure. According to a UK study, approximately 25% of people who had evidence of past infection were asymptomatic, and 40% did not have one of the three classic symptoms (i.e., fever, persistent dry cough, altered sense of taste/smell).[409]

**The most common symptoms are:**

- Fever
- Cough
- Dyspnoea
- Altered sense of taste/smell.

**Less common symptoms include:**

- Myalgia or arthralgia
- Fatigue
- Sputum production
- Chest tightness
• Gastrointestinal symptoms
• Sore throat
• Headache
• Dizziness
• Neurological symptoms
• Ocular symptoms
• Cutaneous symptoms
• Rhinorrhoea/nasal congestion
• Chest pain
• Haemoptysis.

Signs and symptoms of febrile respiratory illness may not possess the necessary sensitivity for early diagnostic suspicion.[410] A Cochrane review found that at least half of patients had a cough, sore throat, fever, myalgia/arthritis, fatigue, or headache. The presence of fever, myalgia/arthritis, fatigue, and headache substantially increased the likelihood of COVID-19 when present. Cough and sore throat were common in people without COVID-19, so these symptoms alone were less helpful for diagnosis. No single symptom or sign included in the review could accurately diagnose COVID-19 and the authors concluded that neither the absence or presence of signs or symptoms are accurate enough to rule in or rule out disease.[404] Non-respiratory symptoms may appear before the onset of fever and lower respiratory tract symptoms.[411]

Preliminary data from the Office for National Statistics in the UK suggest that people infected with the VOC 202012/01 (B.1.1.7 lineage) variant are more likely to have cough, sore throat, fatigue, and myalgia, and are less likely to have altered sense of taste/smell, compared with those infected with other variants.[412] However, analysis of symptom data by researchers at King’s College London found no significant differences in symptoms, severity, or duration of disease caused by the new variant.[413]

The clinical presentation has varied slightly across geographical locations. Initial impressions from the US note that the clinical presentation may be broader than that observed in China and Italy, with chest pain, headaches, altered mental status, and gastrointestinal symptoms all observed on initial presentation. Severe hepatic and renal dysfunction that spares the lungs has also been observed.[414] Data from the first hospitalised patients in New York found that while the most common presenting symptoms were fever, cough, dyspnoea, and myalgia, gastrointestinal symptoms appeared to be more common than in China.[415]

Severity

• 80% of adults present with mild to moderate illness
• 14% of adults present with severe illness
• 5% of adults present with critical illness
• 1% of adults present with asymptomatic illness.[4]

The most prevalent symptoms in patients with mild to moderate illness, according to one European study, are headache, loss of smell, nasal congestion, cough, asthenia, myalgia, rhinorrhoea, gustatory dysfunction, and sore throat. Fever was reported less commonly. The mean duration of symptoms was 11.5 days. The presentation varied according to age, with younger patients generally having ear, nose, and throat complaints, and older patients generally having fever, fatigue, and loss of appetite.[416] More common symptoms in patients with severe disease include fever, dyspnoea, and anorexia.[133]

Pregnant women

• The clinical characteristics in pregnant women are similar to those reported for non-pregnant adults.[417] The most common symptoms in pregnant women are fever and cough. However, pregnant women are less likely to report fever and myalgia compared with non-pregnant women of reproductive age.[418]
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Diagnosis

• It is important to note that symptoms such as fever, dyspnoea, gastrointestinal symptoms, and fatigue may overlap with symptoms due to physiological adaptations of pregnancy or adverse pregnancy events.[2]

Atypical presentations

• Atypical presentations may occur, especially in older patients and patients who are immunocompromised (e.g., falls, delirium/confusion, functional decline, reduced mobility, syncope, persistent hiccups, absence of fever). Older patients and those with comorbidities may present with mild symptoms, but have a high risk of deterioration.[2]
• There have been case reports of parotitis (possibly related to intraparotid lymphadenitis), oral vesiculobullous lesions, retinal lesions, and androgenetic alopecia in patients with COVID-19; however, it is unknown whether these findings are associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection as yet.[419] [420] [421] [422]

Co-infections

• The pooled prevalence of co-infection with viruses and atypical bacteria in SARS-CoV-2-positive patients was 11.6% (16.8% in studies that tested 100% of patients for co-pathogens).[423]
• Bacterial co-infections have been reported in 7% of hospitalised patients, and 14% of patients in intensive care units. The most common bacteria were *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Haemophilus influenzae*, and *Klebsiella pneumoniae*. Co-infections with fungal pathogens and viruses (e.g., respiratory syncytial virus, influenza A) were less commonly reported.[424]
• Co-infections are more common in critically ill patients.[425]
• Co-infections may be associated with protracted respiratory symptoms, prolonged intensive care stay, morbidity, and mortality if not detected and treated early.[426]
• Patients with influenza co-infection showed similar clinical characteristics to patients with COVID-19 only.[427] [428]
• Patients with tuberculosis or influenza and SARS-CoV-2 co-infection have an increased risk of mortality, while the clinical outcomes in patients with HIV or chronic hepatitis and SARS-CoV-2 co-infection are comparable to patients without co-infection.[429]

Clinical presentation in children

Signs and symptoms may be similar to other common viral respiratory infections and other childhood illnesses, so a high index of suspicion for COVID-19 is required in children.

Severity

• 33% of children present with mild illness
• 51% of children present with moderate illness
• 7% of children present with severe illness
• 5% of children present with critical illness
• 20% of children present with asymptomatic illness.[430]

Evidence so far suggests a milder, or asymptomatic, course of disease in the majority of children. Fever and cough are the most common symptoms reported in children. Other less common symptoms include sore throat, nasal congestion, and rhinorrhea. Fever, cough, appetite loss, and dyspnoea are less common in children compared with adults. Children may present with gastrointestinal symptoms more commonly than adults, particularly newborns and infants, and these may be the only symptom.[406] [431] [432] Febrile seizures have been reported rarely.[12] Among children under 5 years of age, 50% were infants and 43% were asymptomatic.[433] The clinical manifestations in children under 5 years of age appear to be milder compared with those of influenza A infection.[434]

Severe disease has been reported rarely in children.[406] [435] In a cross-sectional study of 48 critically ill infants and children in the US, the clinical course and hospital outcomes were better compared with adults. Similar to adults, 80% of critically ill children had pre-existing comorbidities, most commonly immune suppression/cancer, cardiac disease, obesity, and diabetes.[436] [437] It is worth noting that
critical disease has been reported more frequently in children under 1 year of age compared with children older than 1 year of age, and vomiting is more common in this age group.[430] There is increasing concern that a related inflammatory syndrome is emerging in children with severe disease. See the [Complications] section for more information.

**Neonates**

- Respiratory tract symptoms and fever are the most common symptoms in neonates.[438] Although illness is usually mild, severe illness, including cases of late-onset neonatal sepsis and encephalitis, has been reported. Severe illness is slightly more common in neonates compared with older children. Infants may present with irritability, crying, feeding difficulties, silent hypoxia, and neurological symptoms.[406] [439] [440] [441]

**Co-infections**

- Co-infections may be more common in children.[442] Co-infection was documented in 6% of children in US and Italian studies, with the most common pathogens being respiratory syncytial virus, rhinoviruses, Epstein-Barr virus, enteroviruses, influenza A, non-SARS coronaviruses, and *Streptococcus pneumoniae*.[12] [443]

**Physical examination**

Perform a physical examination. Avoid use of a stethoscope if possible due to risk of viral contamination. Patients may be febrile (with or without chills/rigors) and have obvious cough and/or difficulty breathing. Auscultation of the chest may reveal inspiratory crackles, rales, and/or bronchial breathing in patients with pneumonia or respiratory distress. Patients with respiratory distress may have tachycardia, tachypnoea, or cyanosis accompanying hypoxia. Bradycardia has been noted in a small cohort of patients with mild to moderate disease.[444]

**Pulse oximetry**

Pulse oximetry may reveal low oxygen saturation (SpO₂ <90%). Clinicians should be aware that patients with COVID-19 can develop ‘silent hypoxia’: their oxygen saturations can drop to low levels and precipitate acute respiratory failure without the presence of obvious symptoms of respiratory distress.[445]

Pulse oximeters may exhibit suboptimal accuracy in certain populations. Limited data from studies with small numbers of participants suggest that skin pigmentation can affect pulse oximeter accuracy. In one study, occult hypoxaemia (defined in the study as arterial oxygen saturation <88% by arterial blood gas despite oxygen saturation of 92% to 96% on pulse oximetry) was not detected by pulse oximetry nearly three times more frequently in Black patients compared with White patients.[446]

Only a small proportion of patients have other organ dysfunction, meaning that after the initial phase of acute deterioration, traditional methods of recognising further deterioration (e.g., National Early Warning Score 2 [NEWS2] scores) may not help predict those patients who go on to develop respiratory failure.[445]

While NEWS2 is still recommended for use in patients with COVID-19, the UK Royal College of Physicians now advises that any increase in oxygen requirements in these patients should trigger an escalation call to a competent clinical decision maker, and prompt an initial increase in observations to at least hourly until a clinical review happens.[447]

**Initial laboratory investigations**

Order the following laboratory investigations in all patients with severe illness:

- ABG
- FBC
- Comprehensive metabolic panel
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- Blood glucose level
- Coagulation screen
- Inflammatory markers (e.g., serum C-reactive protein, erythrocyte sedimentation rate, interleukin-6, lactate dehydrogenase, procalcitonin, amyloid A, and ferritin)
- Cardiac biomarkers
- Serum creatine kinase and myoglobin.

The most common laboratory abnormalities are lymphopenia, leukocytosis, leukopenia, thrombocytopenia, hypoalbuminaemia, elevated cardiac biomarkers, elevated inflammatory markers, elevated D-dimer, and abnormal liver and renal function.[415][448][449][450] Laboratory abnormalities – in particular, lymphopenia, leukocyte abnormalities, and other markers of systemic inflammation – are less common in children.[406][451][452] Most patients (62%) with asymptomatic disease present with normal laboratory parameters. Of those with laboratory abnormalities, leukopenia, lymphopenia, elevated lactate dehydrogenase, and elevated C-reactive protein were the most common findings.[453]

Collect blood and sputum specimens for culture in patients with severe or critical disease to rule out other causes of lower respiratory tract infection and sepsis, especially patients with an atypical epidemiological history. Specimens should be collected prior to starting empirical antimicrobials if possible.[2]

Molecular testing

Testing strategies vary widely between countries. [454]

Molecular testing is required to confirm the diagnosis. Molecular testing is an aid to diagnosis only. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that healthcare providers consider a positive or negative result in combination with specimen type, clinical observations, patient history, and epidemiological information. Where a test result does not correspond with the clinical presentation, a new specimen should be taken and retested using the same or a different molecular test (see Limitations of molecular testing below).[455]

Order a nucleic acid amplification test, such as real-time reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR), for SARS-CoV-2 in patients with suspected infection whenever possible (see the [Criteria] section).[405] Tests should be performed according to guidance issued by local health authorities and adhere to appropriate biosafety practices. Commonly used assays are expected to be able to detect SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern.[186]

Who to test

- Base decisions about who to test on clinical and epidemiological factors.[405]
- In the UK, testing is recommended in:[456]
  - People with symptoms of new continuous cough, high temperature, or altered sense of smell/taste
  - People with acute respiratory infection, influenza-like illness, clinical or radiological evidence of pneumonia, or acute worsening of underlying respiratory illness, or fever without another cause (whether presenting in primary or secondary care).
- In the US, testing is recommended in:[457]
  - People with symptoms, even if they are mild
  - People who are asymptomatic and have been in close contact (less than 2 metres [6 feet] for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period) with a person with documented infection
  - People who are asymptomatic and have not been in close contact with a person with documented infection only if required by a healthcare provider or public health official.
• The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends testing children with symptoms consistent with COVID-19, children in close contact with an individual with probable or confirmed infection, and children who require screening based on recommendations from public health authorities or other situations (e.g., prior to a medical procedure such as elective surgery or as a school or workplace requirement). The decision to test does not differ by the age of the child. Testing is not recommended for other illnesses that lack shared symptoms (e.g., urinary tract infection, cellulitis), or for children exposed to close contacts of infected individuals unless those contacts are symptomatic or other criteria are met.[458]

• Consult local health authorities for guidance as testing priorities depend on local recommendations and available resources.

Specimens

• The optimal specimen for testing depends on the clinical presentation and the time since symptom onset. The WHO recommends the following.[405]

  • Upper respiratory specimens: recommended for early-stage infections, especially asymptomatic or mild cases. Nasopharyngeal swabs yield a more reliable result than oropharyngeal swabs; combined nasopharyngeal and oropharyngeal swabs further improve reliability.

  • Lower respiratory specimens: recommended for later-stage infections, or patients in whom there is a strong suspicion for infection and their upper respiratory tract specimen test was negative. Suitable specimens are sputum and/or endotracheal aspirate or bronchoalveolar lavage in patients with more severe respiratory disease. However, consider the high risk of aerosol transmission when collecting lower respiratory specimens – an induced sputum specimen is not recommended as it may increase the risk of aerosol transmission.

  • Other respiratory specimens: studies on combined oropharyngeal and nares/nasal swabs, mid-turbinate or lower nasal or nares swabs, or tongue swabs have been conducted; however, further assessment and validation is required. Oral fluid collection may be suitable in some circumstances (e.g., young children, older patients with dementia).

  • Saliva: meta-analyses of paired saliva samples and nasopharyngeal swabs found no statistically significant difference in sensitivity or specificity between these specimens for SARS-CoV-2 detection, especially in the ambulatory setting. Sensitivity was not significantly different among asymptomatic people and outpatients. Methods of saliva collection may affect sensitivity.[459][460] The WHO does not currently recommend the use of saliva as the sole specimen type for routine clinical diagnostics. In contrast, the Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends saliva as a suitable option for molecular testing in symptomatic people.[461]

  • Faecal specimens: consider when upper or lower respiratory specimens are negative and the clinical suspicion for infection remains (may be used from the second week after symptom onset).

  • Recommended specimen types may differ between countries. For example, in the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the following upper respiratory specimens: nasopharyngeal or oropharyngeal swab; nasal mid-turbinate swab; anterior nares swab; or nasopharyngeal/nasal wash/aspirate. Recommended lower respiratory tract specimens include: sputum, bronchoalveolar lavage, tracheal aspirate, pleural fluid, and lung biopsy.[462] Nasal mid-turbinate swab is an acceptable specimen for home or onsite self-collection.[462]

  • Collect specimens under appropriate infection prevention and control procedures.

Test result

• A positive RT-PCR result confirms SARS-CoV-2 infection (in the context of the limitations associated with RT-PCR testing). If the result is negative, and there is still a clinical suspicion of infection (e.g., an epidemiological link, typical x-ray findings, absence of another aetiology),
resample the patient and repeat the test. A positive result confirms infection. If the second test is negative, consider serological testing (see below).[405]

- Genomic sequencing is not routinely recommended, but may be useful to investigate the dynamics of an outbreak, including changes in the size of an epidemic over time, its spatiotemporal spread, and testing hypotheses about transmission routes.[405]

Complications of nasal swab testing

- Complications associated with nasal swab testing are not well characterised. Adverse effects may include epistaxis, nasal discomfort, headache, ear discomfort, and rhinorrhea.[463]
- A case of iatrogenic cerebrospinal fluid leak has been reported after nasal testing for COVID-19 in a woman with an undiagnosed skull base defect at the fovea ethmoidalis.[464]

Testing for other infections

- Collect nasopharyngeal swabs for testing to rule out infection with other respiratory pathogens (e.g., influenza, atypical pathogens) when clinically indicated according to local guidance. Depending on local epidemiology and clinical symptoms, test for other potential causes including malaria, dengue fever, and typhoid fever as appropriate. It is important to note that co-infections can occur, and a positive test for a non-COVID-19 pathogen does not rule out COVID-19.[2] [465]
- When SARS-CoV-2 and influenza viruses are co-circulating, test for both viruses in all hospitalised patients with acute respiratory illness, and only test for influenza virus in outpatients with acute respiratory illness if the results will change clinical management of the patient.[3]

Limitations of molecular testing

**Molecular testing is an aid to diagnosis only.** The WHO recommends that healthcare providers consider a positive or negative result in combination with specimen type, clinical observations, patient history, and epidemiological information. It also recommends that laboratories ensure that specimens with high cycle threshold values are not incorrectly assigned a positive result due to background noise, and that they provide the cycle threshold value in the report to the healthcare provider. Disease prevalence alters the predictive value of test results. As disease prevalence decreases, the risk of a false positive increases. This means that the probability that a person who has a positive result is truly infected decreases as prevalence decreases, irrespective of the claimed specificity of the test. Careful interpretation of weak positive results is needed.[455]

**Interpret RT-PCR test results with caution.**

- The evidence for the use of RT-PCR in the diagnosis of COVID-19 is still emerging, and uncertainties about its efficacy and accuracy remain. Estimates of diagnostic accuracy need to be interpreted with caution in the absence of a definitive reference standard to diagnose or rule out COVID-19. Also, more evidence is needed about the efficacy of testing outside of hospital settings and in asymptomatic or mild cases.[466]
- Few studies have attempted to culture live SARS-CoV-2 virus from human samples. This is an issue because viral culture is regarded as a gold standard test against which any diagnostic index test for viruses must be measured and calibrated, to understand the predictive properties of that test.[467] Prospective routine testing of reference and viral culture specimens is necessary to establish the usefulness and reliability of RT-PCR to diagnose COVID-19, and its relation to patients factors such as date of onset of symptoms and copy threshold, in order to help predict infectivity.[468]
- As there is no clear-cut ‘gold standard’ for COVID-19 testing, evaluating test results can be challenging. Clinical adjudication may be the best available ‘gold standard’ based on repeat swabs, history, clinical presentation, and chest imaging.[469]

**It is not clear whether a positive result always indicates the presence of infectious virus.**

- RT-PCR detects viral RNA, but it is not fully understood how that represents infectious virus. Complete live viruses are necessary for transmission, not the fragments identified by PCR.[470] This could ultimately lead to restrictions for people who do not present an infection risk. Because
inactivated RNA degrades slowly over time, it may still be detected many weeks after the patient is no longer infectious.\[467\]

- One study found that only 28.9% of positive RT-PCR SARS-CoV-2 samples demonstrated viral growth when incubated on Vero cells. There was no growth in samples with an RT-PCR cycle threshold >24, or when the symptom onset to test time was >8 days. Therefore, infectivity of patients with a cycle threshold >24 and duration of symptoms >8 days may be low.\[471\] Another study found that patients with a cycle threshold of 34 or above do not excrete infectious virus.\[472\] A systematic review found that cycle threshold values were significantly lower and log copies higher in specimens that produce live virus culture. Those with high cycle threshold are unlikely to have infectious potential.\[470\]

- [Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine: are you infectious if you have a positive PCR test result for COVID-19?]

Interpreting test results depends on the accuracy of the test itself, and the pre- and post-test probabilities of disease. The accuracy of the result depends on various factors including the site and quality of sampling, stage of disease, degree of viral multiplication or clearance, and disease prevalence.\[469\]

- **Sensitivity and specificity:** the pooled sensitivity has been estimated to be 87.8%, with the specificity estimated to be in the range of 87.7% to 100%.\[466\]

- **Pretest probability:** the pretest probability estimate should be made using knowledge of local rates of infection from national and regional data, as well as the patient’s symptoms, potential exposure to cases, a previous medical history of COVID-19 or the presence of antibodies, and the likelihood of an alternative diagnosis.\[469\] When the pretest probability is low, positive results should be interpreted with caution, and ideally a second specimen tested for confirmation.\[473\]

- **Post-test probability:** the lower the prevalence of disease in a given population, the lower the post-test probability.\[474\] For example, if a test with a specificity of 99% is used to test a high-risk symptomatic population where the likelihood of infection is 50%, the positive predictive value is 99%. This means that for every 100 people with a positive test result, 99 people will have SARS-CoV-2 infection but 1 person without infection will have a false-positive result. Conversely, in a low-risk asymptomatic population where the likelihood of infection is low (e.g., 0.05%), the positive predictive value is around 4.3%. This means that for every 100 people with a positive test result, 4 to 5 people will have SARS-CoV-2 infection, but 95 to 96 people without infection will have a false-positive result.\[475\]

- [BMJ Practice Pointer: interpreting a covid-19 tests result]

**False-positive results**

- False-positive results can be caused by a laboratory error or a cross-reaction with antibodies formed by current and past exposure to seasonal human coronavirus infections (e.g., common cold).\[476\] False-positive results are more likely when the prevalence of SARS-COV-2 is moderate to low.\[477\]

- There is a lack of data on the rate of false-positive tests. However, preliminary estimates in the UK are in the range of 0.8% to 4%.\[478\] This rate could translate into a significant proportion of daily false-positive results due to the current low prevalence of the virus in the UK population, adversely affecting the positive predictive value of the test.\[473\]

- Examples of the potential consequences of false-positive test results include:\[473\]
  - Unnecessarily postponing or cancelling elective procedures or treatments
  - Potential exposure to infection following a wrong pathway in hospital settings during urgent hospital admissions
  - Financial losses due to self-isolation, income losses, and cancelled travel
  - Psychological damage due to misdiagnosis including fear of infecting others or stigmatisation
  - Increased depression or domestic violence due to lockdown and isolation
  - Overestimating the incidence and extent of asymptomatic infection in the population.

**False-negative results**
• False-negative rates of between 2% and 29% have been reported.[469] A systematic review found that the false-negative rate varied across studies from 1.8% to 58% (median 11%); however, there was substantial and largely unexplained heterogeneity across studies.[479]
• The probability of a false-negative result in an infected person decreases from 100% on day 1 of infection to 67% on day 4. The median false-negative rate drops to 38% on the day of symptom onset, decreases to 20% on day 8, and then starts to increase again from day 9.[480]
• Examples of the potential consequences of false-negative test results include:[469]
  • Patients may be moved into non-COVID-19 wards leading to spread of hospital-acquired infection
  • Carers could spread infection to vulnerable dependents
  • Healthcare workers risk spreading the infection to multiple vulnerable individuals.

Serological testing

Serology cannot be used as a standalone diagnostic test for acute SARS-CoV-2 infections. However, it may be useful in various settings (e.g., negative molecular testing, diagnosing patients with late presentation or prolonged symptoms, serosurveillance studies).[405] [481]

[BMJ practice pointer: testing for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies]

The WHO recommends collecting a paired serum sample, one specimen in the acute phase and one in the convalescent phase 2 to 4 weeks later, in patients where infection is strongly suspected and the RT-PCR result is negative.[405]

• Seroconversion or a rise in antibody titres in paired sera help to confirm whether the infection is recent and/or acute. If the initial sample tests positive, this could be due to a past infection that is not related to the current illness.
• Seroconversion may be faster and more robust in patients with severe disease compared with those with mild disease or asymptomatic infection.

The CDC recommends serological testing as a method to support the diagnosis of acute infection in patients who present late (i.e., 9 to 14 days after symptom onset) in addition to other viral detection methods (e.g., RT-PCR, antigen detection tests), or patients who present with late complications (e.g., paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome in children).[482]

• Assays with US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) emergency-use authorisation are preferred. There is no advantage of assays whether they test for immunoglobulin G (IgG), IgM and IgG, or total antibody.
• The test’s positive predictive value should be optimised by choosing tests with high specificity (e.g., >99.5%) and testing people or populations with a high pretest probability of having antibodies, or using an orthogonal testing algorithm. Results should be interpreted in the context of the expected predictive values (positive and negative).

The Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends serological testing in the following circumstances:[483]

• Evaluation of patients with a high clinical suspicion for infection when molecular diagnostic testing is negative and at least 2 weeks have passed since symptom onset
• Evaluation of paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome in children
• Serosurveillance studies.

Antibody responses to SARS-CoV-2 typically occur during the first 1 to 3 weeks of illness, with the seroconversion time of IgG antibodies often being earlier than that of IgM antibodies.[484] [485]
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Diagnosis

A Cochrane review found that antibody tests for IgG/IgM only detected 30% of people with COVID-19 when the test was performed 1 week after the onset of symptoms, but accuracy increased in week 2 with 70% detected and week 3 with over 90% detected. Data beyond 3 weeks were limited. Tests gave false-positive results in 2% of patients without COVID-19. The review found that the sensitivity of antibody tests is too low in the first week since symptom onset to have a primary role in the diagnosis of COVID-19, but tests are likely to have a useful role in detecting previous infection if used 15 or more days after symptom onset (although there were very little data beyond 35 days).[486]

Limitations of serological testing

The evidence for the use of antibody tests in the diagnosis of COVID-19 is still emerging, and uncertainties about their efficacy and accuracy remain. Estimates of diagnostic accuracy need to be interpreted with caution in the absence of a definitive reference standard to diagnose or rule out COVID-19. More evidence is needed about the efficacy of testing outside of hospital settings and in asymptomatic or mild cases. The estimated sensitivity of antibody tests ranged from 18.4% to 96.1% (the lowest reported sensitivity was from a point-of-care test, although a sensitivity <50% was reported for one laboratory test), and specificity ranged from 88.9% to 100%.[466]

Understanding of the antibody response to SARS-CoV-2 is still emerging; therefore, antibody detection tests must be used with caution, and not used to determine acute infections.[405]

- Results do not indicate the presence or absence of current or previous infection with certainty as IgM and IgG antibodies may take 1 to 3 weeks to develop after infection.[482] A reliable diagnosis is often only possible in the recovery phase when opportunities for management or interruption of transmission have passed.[405]
- The duration of the persistence of antibodies produced in response to SARS-CoV-2 is still under investigation.[405] Some people may not develop detectable antibodies after infection, and in those who do, antibody levels may wane over time to undetectable levels.[482] The presence of antibodies that bind to SARS-CoV-2 does not guarantee that they are neutralising antibodies, or that they offer protective immunity.[405]
- Some tests may exhibit cross-reactivity with other coronaviruses, such as those that cause the common cold, which can result in false-positive results.[482]
- Tests should not be used to determine the immune status of an individual, or to make decisions about grouping people residing in or being admitted to congregate settings (e.g., schools, dormitories, correctional facilities) or people returning to their workplace.[482]

Rapid diagnostic tests

Antibody detection

- While rapid antibody detection kits have been approved for the qualitative detection of SARS-CoV-2 IgG/IgM antibodies in serum, plasma, or whole blood, the WHO does not recommend the use of these tests outside of research settings as they have not been validated as yet.[487] Evidence is particularly weak for point-of-care serological tests. A meta-analysis found that the overall sensitivity of chemiluminescent immunoassays (CLIsAs) for IgG or IgM was approximately 98%, and the sensitivity of enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays (ELISAs) was 84%; however, lateral flow immunoassays (LFIsAs), which have been developed as point-of-care tests, had the lowest sensitivity at 66%. Test sensitivity was highest 3 or more weeks after onset of symptoms. Available evidence does not support the use of existing point-of-care serological tests.[488]

Antigen detection

- Antigen testing relies on direct detection of SARS-CoV-2 viral proteins in nasal swabs and other respiratory specimens using a lateral flow immunoassay. Results are usually available in less than 30 minutes. While antigen tests are substantially less sensitive than RT-PCR, they offer the possibility of rapid, inexpensive, and early detection of the most infectious cases in appropriate settings. If used, testing should occur within the first 5 to 7 days following the onset of symptoms.[489]
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Diagnosis

• The WHO recommends antigen testing only in certain scenarios where RT-PCR is unavailable or where prolonged turnaround times preclude clinical utility, provided that the test meets the minimum performance requirements of ≥80% sensitivity and ≥97% specificity compared with an RT-PCR reference assay.[489]

• The FDA has warned that false-positive results can occur with antigen tests, including when users do not follow the instructions for use, and that the number of false-positive tests increases as disease prevalence decreases.[490]

• Antigen testing has demonstrated a higher positive predictive value (90%) than RT-PCR (70%) compared with viral culture results. The positive percentage agreement for detection of infectious virus for the antigen test was similar to RT-PCR when compared with culture results.[491]

• Laboratory-based (non-rapid) antigen tests are also available in some countries.

Chest imaging

All imaging procedures should be performed according to local infection prevention and control procedures to prevent transmission. Chest imaging is considered safe in pregnant women.[492]

Order a chest x-ray in all patients with suspected pneumonia. Unilateral lung infiltrates are found in 25% of patients, and bilateral lung infiltrates are found in 75% of patients.[45] [46] [493] Although chest x-ray appears to have a lower sensitivity compared with chest CT, it has the advantages of being less resource-intensive, associated with lower radiation doses, easier to repeat sequentially, and portable.[494]

Consider ordering a CT scan of the chest. CT imaging is the primary imaging modality in some countries, such as China. It may be helpful in making the diagnosis, guiding individual patient management decisions, aiding the diagnosis of complications, or giving clues to an alternative diagnosis. However, it is not diagnostic for COVID-19 and local guidance should be consulted on whether or not chest imaging should be ordered.[408]

Some institutions in the UK recommend a more pragmatic approach for patients with high clinical suspicion of COVID-19, with chest CT recommended only after two indeterminate or normal chest x-rays in combination with a negative RT-PCR test.[495]

The American College of Radiology recommends reserving CT for hospitalised, symptomatic patients with specific clinical indications for CT, and emphasises that a normal chest CT does not mean that a patient does not have COVID-19 and that an abnormal chest CT is not specific for COVID-19 diagnosis.[496]

Abnormal chest CT findings have been reported in up to 97% of COVID-19 patients in one meta-analysis of 50,466 hospitalised patients.[497] Evidence of pneumonia on CT may preclude a positive RT-PCR result for SARS-CoV-2 in some patients.[498] CT imaging abnormalities may be present in asymptomatic patients. The pooled estimate of the rate of positive chest CT findings in asymptomatic cases was 47.6% (mainly ground-glass opacity).[499] Some patients may present with a normal chest finding despite a positive RT-PCR.[500] Also, results of RT-PCR testing may be false-negative, so patients with typical CT findings should have repeat RT-PCR testing to confirm the diagnosis.[501] Pregnant women appear to present more commonly with more advanced CT findings compared with the general adult population; however, results are similar to those in the general adult population.[502] CT is more sensitive than RT-PCR in detecting COVID-19, but has a very low specificity.[503]

Typical features

• The most common findings are ground-glass opacity, either in isolation or co-existing with other findings such as consolidation, interlobular septal thickening, or crazy-paving pattern. The most
common distribution pattern is bilateral, peripheral/subpleural, posterior distribution of the opacities, with a lower lobe predominance. Extensive/multilobar involvement with consolidations is more common in older patients and those with severe disease.[504]

- Ground-glass opacity has the highest diagnostic performance for COVID-19 pneumonia, followed by ground-glass opacity plus consolidation, and consolidation only.[505] The simultaneous presence of ground-glass opacity and other features of viral pneumonia had optimum performance in the detection of COVID-19 (sensitivity 90% and specificity 89%).[506]
- CT scan generally shows an increase in the size, number, and density of ground-glass opacities in the early follow-up period, with a progression to mixed areas of ground-glass opacities, consolidations, and crazy paving peaking at day 10 to 11, before gradually resolving or persisting as patchy fibrosis.[504]
- A small comparative study found that patients with COVID-19 are more likely to have bilateral involvement with multiple mottling and ground-glass opacity compared with other types of pneumonia.[507]
- Children frequently have normal or mild CT chest findings. The most common signs in children are patchy ground-glass opacity and, less frequently, non-specific patchy shadows, areas of consolidation, and a halo sign. Abnormalities are more common in the lower lobes and are predominantly unilateral. Pleural effusion is rare. Children may have signs of pneumonia on chest imaging despite having minimal or no symptoms.[508]

**Atypical features**

- Pulmonary vascular enlargement, interlobular or intralobular septal thickening, adjacent pleural thickening, air bronchograms, subpleural lines, crazy-paving pattern, bronchus distortion, bronchiectasis, vacuolar retraction sign, and halo sign are atypical features. Pleural effusion, pericardial effusion, cavitation, pneumothorax, and mediastinal lymphadenopathy have also been reported rarely.[504]

The WHO recommends chest imaging in the following scenarios:[494]

- Symptomatic patients with suspected COVID-19 when RT-PCR is not available, RT-PCR test results are delayed, or initial RT-PCR testing is negative but there is a high clinical suspicion for COVID-19 (for diagnosis)
- Patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 who are not currently hospitalised and have mild symptoms (to decide on hospital admission versus home discharge)
- Patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 who are not currently hospitalised and have moderate to severe symptoms (to help decide on regular ward admission versus intensive care unit admission)
- Patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 who are currently hospitalised and have moderate to severe symptoms (to inform therapeutic management).

**Emerging tests**

**Reverse transcription loop-mediated isothermal amplification**

- Reverse transcription loop-mediated isothermal amplification (RT-LAMP) assays are an emerging test to detect SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA. While assays are simple and quick, there is less evidence for their use. Assays for SARS-CoV-2 have been developed and are being evaluated.[509] [510] [511]

**Lung ultrasound**

- Lung ultrasound is used as a diagnostic tool in some centres as an alternative to chest x-ray and chest CT. Although there is only very low-certainty evidence supporting its diagnostic accuracy, it might be helpful as a supplemental or alternate imaging modality.[494] It has the advantages of portability, bedside evaluation, reduced healthcare worker exposure, easier sterilisation process, absence of ionising radiation exposure, and repeatability during follow-up. It may also be more readily available in resource-limited settings. However, it also has some limitations (e.g.,
it is unable to discern chronicity of a lesion) and other imaging modalities may be required. B-lines are the prominent pattern in patients with COVID-19, occurring with a pooled frequency of 97%. Pleural line abnormalities are also common, with a pooled frequency of 70%. While these findings are not specific for COVID-19, they increase the likelihood of disease in the context of a characteristic clinical presentation. Other findings include consolidations, pleural thickening, and pleural effusion.[512] May be used in pregnant women and children.[513] [514]

- [BSTI: lung ultrasound (LUS) for COVID-19 patients in critical care areas]

Viral isolation

- Viral isolation is not recommended as a routine diagnostic procedure. All procedures involving viral isolation in cell culture require trained staff and biosafety level 3 (BSL-3) facilities.[405]

Management of co-existing conditions

Best Practice has published a separate topic on the management of co-existing conditions in the context of COVID-19. [BMJ Best Practice: management of co-existing conditions in the context of COVID-19]

History and exam

Key diagnostic factors

fever (common)

Reported in approximately 77% of patients.[133] In one case series, only 44% of patients had a fever on presentation, but it developed in 89% of patients after hospitalisation.[515] The course may be prolonged and intermittent, and some patients may have chills/rigors. In children, fever may be absent or brief and rapidly resolving.[516]

cough (common)

Reported in approximately 68% of patients.[133] The cough is usually dry; however, a productive cough has been reported in some patients.

dyspnoea (common)

Reported in approximately 38% of patients.[133] Median time from onset of symptoms to development of dyspnoea is 5 to 8 days.[45] [46] [517] It is less common in children, but the most common sign in neonates.[406] May last weeks after initial onset of symptoms. Wheeze has been reported in 17% of patients.[518]

altered sense of smell/taste (common)

Olfactory dysfunction (anosmia/hyposmia) has been reported in approximately 41% of patients, and gustatory dysfunction (ageusia/dysgeusia) has been reported in approximately 35% of patients.[133] Prevalence appears to be higher in European studies.[519] May be an early symptom before the onset of other symptoms, or may be the only symptom in patients with mild to moderate illness.[520] Prevalence of anosmia/ageusia presenting before other symptoms was 13% to 73%, at the same time as other symptoms was 14% to 39%, and after other symptoms was 27% to 49%.[521] Complete resolution or improvement in symptoms was reported in 89% of patients 4 weeks after onset.[522] Anosmia or hyposmia is significantly associated with an enhanced risk of testing positive for COVID-19, and is a good predictor of infection.[523] Many drugs are associated with taste and smell changes (e.g., antibiotics, ACE inhibitors) and should be considered in the differential diagnosis.[524]
Other diagnostic factors

fatigue (common)

Reported in approximately 30% of patients.[133] Patients may also report malaise. Fatigue and exhaustion may be extreme and protracted, even in patients with mild disease.

myalgia or arthralgia (common)

Reported in approximately 17% (myalgia) and 11% (arthralgia) of patients.[518] Arthritis has been reported rarely.[525]

sputum production/expectoration (common)

Reported in approximately 18% of patients.[133]

chest tightness (common)

Reported in approximately 22.9% of patients.[449]

gastrointestinal symptoms (common)

Reported in 20% of patients. The weighted pooled prevalence of specific symptoms is as follows: loss of appetite 22.3%; diarrhoea 2.4%; nausea/vomiting 9%; and abdominal pain 6.2%. Gastrointestinal symptoms appear to be more prevalent outside of China, although this may be due to increased awareness and reporting of these symptoms as the pandemic progressed.[526] Gastrointestinal symptoms are not associated with an increased likelihood for testing positive for COVID-19; however, anorexia and diarrhoea, when combined with loss of smell/taste and fever, were 99% specific for COVID-19 infection in one prospective case-control study.[527] The presence of gastrointestinal symptoms may be a predictor of progression to severe disease.[528] [529] Children may present with gastrointestinal symptoms more commonly than adults, particularly newborns and infants, and these may be the only symptom.[406] Haematochezia has been reported.[530]

sore throat (common)

Reported in approximately 16% of patients.[133] Usually presents early in the clinical course.

headache (common)

Reported in approximately 16% of patients.[133]

dizziness (common)

Reported in approximately 11% of patients.[518]

neurological symptoms (common)

Confusion has been reported in approximately 11% of patients.[518] Prevalence of confusion/delirium and agitation is high (65% and 69%, respectively) in patients in the intensive care unit.[531] Delirium is associated with an increased risk of mortality, and rapid onset may indicate clinical deterioration.[532] Benzodiazepine use and the lack of family visitation (virtual or in-person) have been identified as risk factors for delirium.[533] The pooled prevalence of anxiety, depression, and insomnia is 15.2%, 16%, and 23.9%, respectively.[534] Altered mental status was as common in younger hospitalised patients (<60 years) as it was in older patients in one study.[535] [536]

ocular symptoms (common)
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Diagnosis

Reported in 11% of patients. The most common ocular symptoms include dry eye or foreign body sensation (16%), redness (13.3%), tearing (12.8%), itching (12.6%), eye pain (9.6%), and discharge (8.8%). Conjunctivitis was the most common ocular disease in patients with ocular manifestations (88.8%).[537] Most symptoms are mild and last for 4 to 14 days with no complications. Prodromal symptoms occur in 12.5% of patients.[538] Mild ocular symptoms (e.g., conjunctival discharge, eye rubbing, conjunctival congestion) were reported in 22.7% of children in one cross-sectional study. Children with systemic symptoms were more likely to develop ocular symptoms.[539]

**rhinorrhoea/nasal congestion (uncommon)**

Rhinorrhea has been reported in approximately 8% of patients, and nasal congestion has been reported in approximately 5% of patients.[518]

**chest pain (uncommon)**

Reported in approximately 7% of patients.[518] May indicate pneumonia.

**cutaneous symptoms (uncommon)**

The pooled prevalence of overall cutaneous lesions is 5.7%. The most common symptoms are a viral exanthem-like presentation (4.2%), maculopapular rash (3.8%), and vesiculobullous lesions (1.7%). Other manifestations include urticaria, chilblain-like lesions, livedo reticularis, and finger/toe gangrene.[540] In the UK COVID Symptom Study, 17% of respondents reported rash as the first symptom of disease, and 21% of respondents reported rash as the only clinical sign.[541] It is unclear whether skin lesions are from viral infection, systemic consequences of the infection, or drugs the patient may be on. Further data is required to better understand cutaneous involvement.

[British Association of Dermatologists: Covid-19 skin patterns]

**haemoptysis (uncommon)**

Reported in approximately 2% of patients.[518] May be a symptom of pulmonary embolism.[542]

**bronchial breath sounds (uncommon)**

May indicate pneumonia.

**tachypnoea (uncommon)**

May be present in patients with acute respiratory distress.

**tachycardia (uncommon)**

May be present in patients with acute respiratory distress.

**cyanosis (uncommon)**

May be present in patients with acute respiratory distress.

**crackles/rales on auscultation (uncommon)**

May be present in patients with acute respiratory distress.
## Investigations

### 1st test to order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR)</td>
<td>positive for SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA; may be positive for influenza A and B viruses and other respiratory pathogens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Important**: the US Food and Drug Administration has warned that false-negative results may occur with any molecular test for the detection of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) if a mutation occurs in the part of the virus’ genome assessed by that test. Multiple genetic targets to determine a final result are less likely to be impacted by increased prevalence of genetic variants. Consider negative results in combination with clinical observations, patient history, and epidemiological information.\[543]\]

Order an RT-PCR for SARS-CoV-2 in patients with suspected infection whenever possible (see the [Criteria] section).\[405]\]

Commonly used assays are expected to be able to detect SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern.\[186]\]

Molecular testing is an aid to diagnosis only. The World Health Organization recommends that healthcare providers consider a positive or negative result in combination with specimen type, clinical observations, patient history, and epidemiological information. Where a test result does not correspond with the clinical presentation, a new specimen should be taken and retested using the same or a different molecular test.\[455]\]

Base decisions about who to test on clinical and epidemiological factors.\[405]\] Consult local health authorities for guidance as testing priorities depend on local recommendations and available resources.

In the UK, testing is recommended in: (1) people with symptoms of new continuous cough, high temperature, or altered sense of smell/taste; (2) people with acute respiratory infection, influenza-like illness, clinical or radiologic evidence of pneumonia, or acute worsening of underlying respiratory illness, or fever without another cause (whether presenting in primary or secondary care).\[456]\]

In the US, testing is recommended in: (1) people with symptoms, even if they are mild; (2) people who are asymptomatic and have been in close contact (less than 2 metres [6 feet] for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period) with a person with documented infection; (3) people who are asymptomatic and have not been in close contact for at least 15 minutes with a person with documented infection only if required by a healthcare provider or public health official.\[457]\]

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends testing children with symptoms consistent with COVID-19, children in close contact with an individual with probable or confirmed infection, and children who require screening based on recommendations from public health authorities or other situations (e.g., prior to a medical procedure such as elective surgery or as a school or workplace requirement). The decision to test does not differ by the age of the child. Testing is not recommended for other illnesses that lack shared symptoms.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(e.g., urinary tract infection, cellulitis), or for children exposed to close contacts of infected individuals unless those contacts are symptomatic or other criteria are met.[458]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| The optimal specimen for testing depends on the clinical presentation and the time since symptom onset. The World Health Organization recommends upper respiratory specimens (nasopharyngeal and/or oropharyngeal swabs) for early-stage infections, especially asymptomatic or mild cases, and lower respiratory specimens (sputum and/or endotracheal aspirate or bronchoalveolar lavage in patients with more severe respiratory disease) for later-stage infections or patients in whom there is a strong suspicion for infection and their upper respiratory tract specimen test was negative. Other specimens (e.g., nasal mid-turbinate swab, anterior nares swab, nasopharyngeal/nasal wash/aspirate, saliva, faecal) may be recommended in some circumstances; consult local guidance.[405] [462] [483] Meta-analyses of paired saliva samples and nasopharyngeal swabs found no statistically significant difference in sensitivity or specificity between these specimens for SARS-CoV-2 detection, especially in the ambulatory setting. Sensitivity was not significantly different among asymptomatic people and outpatients. Methods of saliva collection may affect sensitivity.[459] [460] A positive RT-PCR result confirms SARS-CoV-2 infection (in the context of the limitations associated with RT-PCR testing). If the result is negative, and there is still a clinical suspicion of infection (e.g., an epidemiological link, typical x-ray findings, absence of another aetiology), resample the patient and repeat the test. A positive result confirms infection. If the second test is negative, consider serological testing (see below).[405] The pooled sensitivity has been estimated to be 87.8%, with the specificity estimated to be in the range of 87.7% to 100%.[466] Interpret test results with caution. Evidence for the use of RT-PCR in the diagnosis of COVID-19 is still emerging, and uncertainties about its efficacy and accuracy remain.[466] It is not fully understood whether a positive result always represents infectious virus, especially at high cycle thresholds.[467] [470] [471] [472] Interpreting the result depends on the accuracy of the test itself, and the pre- and post-test probabilities of disease.[469] When the pretest probability is low, positive results should be interpreted with caution, and ideally a second specimen tested for confirmation.[473] The lower the prevalence of disease in a given population, the lower the post-test probability.[474] False-positive results can be caused by a laboratory error or a cross-reaction with antibodies formed by current and past exposure to seasonal human coronavirus infections (e.g., common cold), and are more likely when the prevalence of disease is moderate to low.[476] [477] Preliminary estimates of the false-positive rate in the UK are in the range of 0.8% to 4%.[478] False-negative rates of between 2% and 29% have been reported.[469] A systematic review found that the false-negative rate varied across studies from 1.8% to 58% (median 11%); however, there was substantial and largely unexplained heterogeneity across studies.[479] Also collect nasopharyngeal swabs to rule out influenza and other respiratory infections according to local guidance. It is important
### Diagnosis

**Test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)**

To note that co-infections can occur, and a positive test for a non-COVID-19 pathogen does not rule out COVID-19. When SARS-CoV-2 and influenza viruses are co-circulating, test for both viruses in all hospitalised patients with acute respiratory illness, and only test for influenza virus in outpatients with acute respiratory illness if the results will change clinical management of the patient. Single-test multiplex assays to diagnose infection caused by influenza A, influenza B, and SARS-CoV-2 are available in some countries.

**pulse oximetry**

**Order in patients with severe illness.**

Recommended in patients with respiratory distress and cyanosis.

Clinicians should be aware that patients with COVID-19 can develop ‘silent hypoxia’: their oxygen saturations can drop to low levels and precipitate acute respiratory failure without the presence of obvious symptoms of respiratory distress.

Pulse oximeters may exhibit suboptimal accuracy in certain populations. Limited data from studies with small numbers of participants suggest that skin pigmentation can affect pulse oximeter accuracy. In one study, occult hypoxaemia (defined in the study as arterial oxygen saturation <88% by arterial blood gas despite oxygen saturation of 92% to 96% on pulse oximetry) was not detected by pulse oximetry nearly three times more frequently in Black patients compared with White patients.

Only a small proportion of patients have other organ dysfunction, meaning that after the initial phase of acute deterioration, traditional methods of recognising further deterioration (e.g., National Early Warning Score 2 [NEWS2] scores) may not help predict those patients who go on to develop respiratory failure.

**ABG**

**Order in patients with severe illness as indicated to detect hypercarbia or acidosis.**

Recommended in patients with respiratory distress and cyanosis who have low oxygen saturation (SpO₂ <90%).

**FBC**

**Order in patients with severe illness.**

Lymphopenia, leukocytosis, thrombocytopenia, decreased eosinophils, decreased haemoglobin, and high neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio are significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression. Severe cases are more likely to present with lymphopenia and thrombocytopenia, but not leukopenia.

Elevated red blood cell distribution width (at admission and increasing during hospitalisation) has been associated with a significantly increased risk of mortality in hospitalised patients.

- May show low oxygen saturation (SpO₂ <90%)
- May show low partial oxygen pressure
- Lymphopenia; leukocytosis; leukopenia; thrombocytopenia; decreased eosinophils; decreased haemoglobin

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolute counts of major lymphocyte subsets, particularly CD4+ and CD8+ T-cell counts, are significantly decreased in patients with severe disease.</td>
<td>elevated liver enzymes; elevated total bilirubin; renal impairment; hypoalbuminaemia; electrolyte derangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late-phase thrombocytopenia (i.e., occurring 3 weeks or more after symptom onset) has been reported but is uncommon.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comprehensive metabolic panel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated liver enzymes, total bilirubin, creatinine, and serum urea, and hypoalbuminaemia are significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypokalaemia has been reported in 54% of patients.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypocalcaemia has been reported in 63% of patients, and is associated with poor outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other electrolyte derangements may be present.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>blood glucose level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High fasting blood glucose level on admission independently predicts poor prognosis.</td>
<td>variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypoglycaemia has also been associated with increased mortality in a retrospective cohort study.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coagulation screen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated D-dimer, elevated fibrinogen (and fibrin degradation product), and prolonged prothrombin time are significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression.</td>
<td>elevated D-dimer; prolonged prothrombin time; elevated fibrinogen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The risk of severe disease and mortality is 2-fold and 4-fold higher, respectively, in patients with elevated D-dimer levels.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients with very high D-dimer levels have an increased risk of thrombosis.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>cardiac biomarkers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated serum troponin I and creatine kinase-myocardial band (CK-MB) are significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression.</td>
<td>may be elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other cardiac biomarkers (e.g., brain natriuretic peptide, cardiac troponin T) may also be elevated and are associated with severe disease and worse outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK-MB has been found to be elevated in mild disease in children. The significance of this is unknown.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serum C-reactive protein</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may be elevated</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Test</td>
<td>Result</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated C-reactive protein is significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression.[544]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients with elevated C-reactive protein at the time of initial presentation were more likely to have acute kidney injury, venous thromboembolism, critical illness, and in-hospital mortality during their hospital stay compared with patients with lower levels.[559]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum erythrocyte sedimentation rate</td>
<td>may be elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonly elevated in patients with COVID-19.[450]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum lactate dehydrogenase</td>
<td>may be elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated serum lactate dehydrogenase is significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression.[544]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum interleukin-6 level</td>
<td>may be elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated interleukin-6 level is significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression.[544]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less likely to be elevated in children.[560]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum procalcitonin</td>
<td>may be elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated serum procalcitonin is significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression.[544]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated serum procalcitonin may be more common in children.[442] [46]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May be elevated in patients with secondary bacterial infection.[45]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is insufficient evidence to recommend routine procalcitonin testing to guide decisions about the use of antibiotics.[561]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However, it may be helpful in limiting overuse of antibiotics in patients with COVID-19-related pneumonia.[562]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum ferritin level</td>
<td>may be elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated ferritin is significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression.[563]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May indicate development of cytokine release syndrome.[564]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum amyloid A level</td>
<td>may be elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test</td>
<td>Result</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Levels increase in severe disease; therefore, it may be useful as a biomarker for predicting disease progression.</strong>[565]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>serum creatine kinase and myoglobin</strong></td>
<td>may be elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in patients with severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated serum creatine kinase and myoglobin are significantly associated with severe disease, and may be useful for predicting disease progression.[544]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>blood and sputum cultures</strong></td>
<td>negative for bacterial infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collect blood and sputum specimens for culture in patients with severe or critical disease to rule out other causes of lower respiratory tract infection and sepsis, especially patients with an atypical epidemiological history.[2]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing is most useful when there is concern for multidrug-resistant pathogens.[562]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specimens should be collected prior to starting empirical antimicrobials if possible.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>chest x-ray</strong></td>
<td>unilateral or bilateral lung infiltrates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order in all patients with suspected pneumonia.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unilateral lung infiltrates are found in 25% of patients, and bilateral lung infiltrates are found in 75% of patients.[45] [46] [493]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although chest x-ray appears to have a lower sensitivity compared with chest CT, it has the advantages of being less resource-intensive, associated with lower radiation doses, easier to repeat sequentially, and portable.[494]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Other tests to consider

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>computed tomography (CT) chest</td>
<td>ground-glass opacity in isolation or co-existing with other findings (e.g., consolidation, interlobular septal thickening, crazy-paving pattern); bilateral, peripheral/subpleural, posterior distribution with a lower lobe predominance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consider a CT scan of the chest. Consult local guidance on whether to perform a CT scan. The British Society of Thoracic Imaging (BSTI) recommends CT imaging in patients with clinically suspected COVID-19 who are seriously ill if chest x-ray is uncertain or normal. [BSTI: radiology decision tool for suspected COVID-19] Some institutions in the UK recommend a more pragmatic approach for patients with high clinical suspicion of COVID-19, with chest CT recommended only after two indeterminate or normal chest x-rays in combination with a negative RT-PCR test. [495] The American College of Radiology recommends reserving CT for hospitalised, symptomatic patients with specific clinical indications for CT, and emphasises that a normal chest CT does not mean that a patient does not have COVID-19 and that an abnormal chest CT is not specific for COVID-19 diagnosis. [496]

Abnormal chest CT findings have been reported in up to 97% of hospitalised patients. [497] Evidence of pneumonia on CT may precede a positive RT-PCR result for SARS-CoV-2 in some patients. [498] CT imaging abnormalities may be present in asymptomatic patients. The pooled estimate of the rate of positive chest CT findings in asymptomatic cases was 47.6% (mainly ground-glass opacity). [499] Some patients may present with a normal chest finding despite a positive RT-PCR. [500] Also, results of RT-PCR testing may be false-negative, so patients with typical CT findings should have repeat RT-PCR testing to confirm the diagnosis. [501]

The most common findings are ground-glass opacity, either in isolation or co-existing with other findings such as consolidation, interlobular septal thickening, or crazy-paving pattern. The most common distribution pattern is bilateral, peripheral/subpleural, posterior distribution of the opacities, with a lower lobe predominance. Extensive/multilobar involvement with consolidations is more common in older patients and those with severe disease. Pulmonary vascular enlargement, interlobular or intralobular septal thickening, adjacent pleural thickening, air bronchograms, subpleural lines, crazy-paving pattern, bronchus distortion, bronchiectasis, vascular retraction sign, and halo sign are atypical features. Pleural effusion, pericardial effusion, caviation, pneumothorax, and mediastinal lymphadenopathy have also been reported rarely. [504] Ground-glass opacity has the highest diagnostic performance for COVID-19 pneumonia, followed by ground-glass opacity plus consolidation, and consolidation only. [505]

Children frequently have normal or mild CT chest findings. The most common signs in children are patchy ground-glass opacity and, less frequently, non-specific patchy shadows, areas of consolidation, and a halo sign. Abnormalities are more common in the lower lobes and are predominantly unilateral. Pleural effusion is rare. [508]

CT scan generally shows an increase in the size, number, and density of ground-glass opacities in the early follow-up period, with a progression to mixed areas of ground-glass opacities, consolidations, and crazy paving peaking at day 10 to 11, before gradually resolving or persisting as patchy fibrosis. [504]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The positive predictive value was low (1.5% to 30.7%) in low-</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>prevalence regions, and the negative predictive value ranged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from 95.4% to 99.8% in one meta-analysis. Pooled sensitivity and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>specificity were 94% to 96% and 37%, respectively.[566][567] The</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simultaneous presence of ground-glass opacity and other features</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of viral pneumonia had optimum performance in the detection of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19 (sensitivity 90% and specificity 89%).[506]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT is more sensitive than RT-PCR in detecting COVID-19, but has</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a very low specificity.[503] In a cohort of over 1000 patients in a</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>hyperendemic area in China, chest CT had a higher sensitivity for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diagnosis of COVID-19 compared with initial RT-PCR from swab samples</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(88% versus 59%). Improvement of abnormal CT findings also preceded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change from RT-PCR positivity to negativity in this cohort during</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recovery. The sensitivity of chest CT was 97% in patients who</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ultimately had positive RT-PCR results. However, in this setting,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75% of patients with negative RT-PCR results also had positive chest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT findings. Of these patients, 48% were considered highly likely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cases, while 33% were considered probable cases.[568]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transverse CT scans from a 32-year-old man, showing ground-glass     |        |
opacity and consolidation of lower lobe of right lung near the       |        |
pleura on day 1 after symptom onset (top panel), and bilateral      |        |
ground-glass opacity and consolidation on day 7 after symptom onset.  |        |

**serology**

**Important**: a positive test for spike protein IgM or IgG could    |        |
indicate either prior infection or prior vaccination with a COVID-19   |        |
vaccine. To evaluate for evidence of prior infection in an individual |        |
who has received a vaccine, a test that specifically evaluates IgM    |        |
or IgG to the nucleocapsid protein should be used. A positive        |        |
positive for SARS-CoV-2 virus antibodies; seroconversion or a rise in|
antibody titres in paired sera.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nucleocapsid protein-based assay indicates prior infection. Antibody testing is not currently recommended to assess immunity following vaccination.</td>
<td>Cannot be used as a standalone diagnostic for acute infections; however, may be useful in various settings (e.g., negative molecular testing, diagnosing patients with late presentation or prolonged symptoms, serosurveillance studies).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**[BMJ practice pointer: testing for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies]**

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends collecting a paired serum sample, one specimen in the acute phase and one in the convalescent phase 2 to 4 weeks later, in patients where infection is strongly suspected and the RT-PCR result is negative. Seroconversion or a rise in antibody titres in paired sera help to confirm whether the infection is recent and/or acute. If the initial sample tests positive, this could be due to a past infection that is not related to the current illness. Seroconversion may be faster and more robust in patients with severe disease compared with those with mild disease or asymptomatic infection.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends serological testing as a method to support the diagnosis of acute infection in patients who present late (i.e., 9 to 14 days after symptom onset) in addition to other viral detection methods (e.g., RT-PCR, antigen detection tests), or patients who present with late complications (e.g., paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome in children).

The Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends serological testing in the following circumstances: evaluation of patients with a high clinical suspicion for infection when molecular diagnostic testing is negative and at least 2 weeks have passed since symptom onset; evaluation of paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome in children; and serosurveillance studies.

Antibody responses to SARS-CoV-2 typically occur during the first 1 to 3 weeks of illness, with the seroconversion time of IgG antibodies often being earlier than that of IgM antibodies.

The estimated sensitivity of antibody tests ranged from 18.4% to 96.1% (the lowest reported sensitivity was from a point-of-care test, although a sensitivity <50% was reported for one laboratory test), and specificity ranged from 88.9% to 100%. Estimates of diagnostic accuracy need to be interpreted with caution in the absence of a definitive reference standard to diagnose or rule out COVID-19.

Limitations of testing: serological testing cannot be used to determine acute infection; results do not indicate the presence or absence of current or previous infection with certainty; reliable diagnosis is often only possible in the recovery phase when opportunities for management or interruption of transmission have passed; cross-reactivity with other coronaviruses, which can result in false-positive results.

While rapid antibody detection kits have been approved for the qualitative detection of SARS-CoV-2 IgG/IgM antibodies in serum,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plasma, or whole blood, the WHO does not recommend the use of these tests outside of research settings as they have not been validated as yet.[487]</td>
<td>positive for SARS-CoV-2 virus antigen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**antigen test**

Rapid diagnostic test. Relies on direct detection of SARS-CoV-2 viral proteins in nasal swabs and other respiratory specimens using a lateral flow immunoassay. Results are usually available in less than 30 minutes. While antigen tests are substantially less sensitive than RT-PCR, they offer the possibility of rapid, inexpensive, and early detection of the most infectious cases in appropriate settings. If used, testing should occur within the first 5 to 7 days following the onset of symptoms. The World Health Organization recommends antigen testing only in certain scenarios where RT-PCR is unavailable or where prolonged turnaround times preclude clinical utility, provided that the test meets the minimum performance requirements of ≥80% sensitivity and ≥97% specificity compared with an RT-PCR reference assay.[489]

The US Food and Drug Administration has warned that false-positive results can occur with antigen tests, including when users do not follow the instructions for use, and that the number of false-positive tests increases as disease prevalence decreases.[490]

Rapid, lateral flow antigen tests for home use are available over-the-counter in some countries.[569]

Laboratory-based (non-rapid) antigen tests are also available in some countries.
## Emerging tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reverse transcription loop-mediated isothermal amplification (RT-LAMP)</td>
<td>positive for SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A similar process to RT-PCR, but uses constant temperatures and produces more viral DNA compared with RT-PCR. While simple and quick, it is a newer technology and there is less evidence for its use. Assays for SARS-CoV-2 have been developed and are being evaluated.[509] [510] [511]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An at-home test kit that provides rapid results within 30 minutes has been approved in the US under an emergency-use authorisation for self-testing at home that provides rapid results.[570]</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>lung ultrasound</td>
<td>B-lines; pleural line abnormalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lung ultrasound is used as a diagnostic tool in some centres as an alternative to chest x-ray and chest CT. Although there is only very low-certainty evidence supporting its diagnostic accuracy, it might be helpful as a supplemental or alternate imaging modality.[494]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has the advantages of portability, bedside evaluation, reduced healthcare worker exposure, easier sterilisation process, absence of ionising radiation exposure, and repeatability during follow-up. It may also be more readily available in resource-limited settings. However, it also has some limitations (e.g., it is unable to discern chronicity of a lesion) and other imaging modalities may be required.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-lines are the prominent pattern in patients with COVID-19, occurring with a pooled frequency of 97%. Pleural line abnormalities are also common with a pooled frequency of 70%. While these findings are not specific for COVID-19, they increase the likelihood of disease in the context of a characteristic clinical presentation. Other findings include consolidations, pleural thickening, and pleural effusion.[512]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May be used in pregnant women and children.[513] [514]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[BSTI: lung ultrasound (LUS) for COVID-19 patients in critical care areas]</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Differentials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Differentiating signs / symptoms</th>
<th>Differentiating tests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Community-acquired pneumonia | • Lack of residence in/travel history to an area with ongoing transmission, or lack of close contact with a suspected/confirmed case of COVID-19 in the 14 days prior to symptom onset.  
• Differentiating COVID-19 from community-acquired bacterial pneumonia is not usually possible from signs and symptoms. However, patients with bacterial pneumonia are more likely to have rapid development of symptoms and purulent sputum. They are less likely to have myalgia, anosmia, or pleuritic pain. | • Blood or sputum culture or molecular testing: positive for causative organism.  
• RT-PCR: negative for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) viral RNA (co-infections are possible).  
• CT chest: centrilobular nodules, mucoid impactions. |
| Influenza infection         | • Lack of residence in/travel history to an area with ongoing transmission, or lack of close contact with a suspected/confirmed case of COVID-19 in the 14 days prior to symptom onset.  
• Differentiating COVID-19 from community-acquired respiratory tract infections is not possible from signs and symptoms.  
• Incubation period is shorter.[574] Symptoms typically peak during the first 3 to 7 days of illness with influenza, compared with week 2 or 3 of illness with COVID-19.[575]  
• More common in children.[575] Children with COVID-19 tend to be older, and are more likely to have comorbidities, fever, gastrointestinal symptoms, headache, and chest pain compared with those with influenza.[576]  
• Rhinorrhea, sore throat, and dyspnoea are more common.[574] New-onset smell and/or taste disorders | • Only testing can distinguish between influenza infection and COVID-19 and identify co-infection. When SARS-CoV-2 and influenza viruses are co-circulating, test for both viruses in all hospitalised patients with acute respiratory illness, and only test for influenza virus in outpatients with acute respiratory illness if the results will change clinical management of the patient.[3]  
• RT-PCR: positive for influenza A or B viral RNA; negative for SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA (co-infections are possible).  
• Chest x-ray: less likely to be abnormal.[574]  
• CT chest: there is emerging evidence that CT can be used for differentiating between influenza and COVID-19. COVID-19 patients are more likely to have rounded or linear opacities, crazy-paving sign, vascular enlargement, and interlobular septal
## Diagnosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Differentiating signs / symptoms</th>
<th>Differentiating tests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Common cold** | • Lack of residence in/travel history to an area with ongoing transmission, or lack of close contact with a suspected/confirmed case of COVID-19 in the 14 days prior to symptom onset.  
• Differentiating COVID-19 from community-acquired respiratory tract infections is not possible from signs and symptoms. | • RT-PCR: positive for causative organism; negative for SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA (co-infections are possible). |

**Other viral or bacterial respiratory infections** | • Lack of residence in/travel history to an area with ongoing transmission, or lack of close contact with a suspected/confirmed case of COVID-19 in the 14 days prior to symptom onset.  
• Differentiating COVID-19 from community-acquired respiratory tract infections is not possible from signs and symptoms.  
• Adenovirus and *Mycoplasma* should be considered in clusters of pneumonia patients, especially in closed settings such as military camps and schools. | • Blood or sputum culture of molecular testing: positive for causative organism.  
• RT-PCR: negative for SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA (co-infections are possible). |

**Aspiration pneumonia** | • Lack of residence in/travel history to an area with ongoing transmission, or lack of close contact with a suspected/confirmed case of COVID-19 in the 14 days prior to symptom onset. | • RT-PCR: negative for SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA (co-infections are possible).  
• CT chest: difficult to distinguish on CT; however, anterior lung involvement was less common in a case-control study.[577]  
• Inflammatory markers and coagulation screen: there is emerging evidence that inflammatory markers (lactate dehydrogenase, erythrocyte sedimentation rate, C-reactive protein) and coagulation parameters are not as high in patients with influenza compared with COVID-19.[580] |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Differentiating signs / symptoms</th>
<th>Differentiating tests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pneumocystis jirovecii pneumonia</td>
<td>• Lack of residence in/travel history to an area with ongoing transmission, or lack of close contact with a suspected/confirmed case of COVID-19 in the 14 days prior to symptom onset.</td>
<td>• Sputum culture: positive for <em>Pneumocystis</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Differentiating COVID-19 from pneumocystis jirovecii pneumonia is not usually possible from signs and symptoms.</td>
<td>• RT-PCR: negative for SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA (co-infections are possible).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Patients are usually immunocompromised (e.g., HIV positive) and duration of symptoms may be longer.</td>
<td>• CT chest: ground-glass opacity is usually more diffusely distributed with a tendency to spare the subpleural regions. [573]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS)</td>
<td>• Travel history to the Middle East or contact with a confirmed case of MERS.</td>
<td>• Reverse-transcriptase polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR): positive for MERS-CoV viral RNA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)</td>
<td>• There have been no cases of SARS reported since 2004.</td>
<td>• RT-PCR: positive for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) viral RNA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avian influenza A (H7N9) virus infection</td>
<td>• May be difficult to differentiate based on epidemiological history as avian influenza H7N9 is endemic in China.</td>
<td>• RT-PCR: positive for H7-specific viral RNA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Close contact with infected birds (e.g., farmer or visitor to a live market in endemic areas), or living in an area when avian influenza is endemic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avian influenza A (H5N1) virus infection</td>
<td>• Lack of residence in/travel history to an area with ongoing transmission, or lack of close contact with a suspected/confirmed case</td>
<td>• RT-PCR: positive for H5N1 viral RNA.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Condition  | Differentiating signs / symptoms  | Differentiating tests
---|---|---
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)  | of COVID-19 in the 14 days prior to symptom onset.  
• Close contact with infected birds (e.g., farmer or visitor to a live market in endemic areas), or living in an area when avian influenza is endemic.  |  

### Pulmonary tuberculosis  
- Consider diagnosis in endemic areas, especially in patients who are immunocompromised.  
- History of symptoms is usually longer.  
- Presence of night sweats and weight loss may help to differentiate.  
- Chest x-ray: fibronodular opacities in upper lobes with or without cavitation; atypical pattern includes opacities in middle or lower lobes, or hilar or paratracheal lymphadenopathy, and/or pleural effusion.  
- Sputum acid-fast bacilli smear and sputum culture: positive.  
- Molecular testing: positive for *Mycoplasma tuberculosis*.

### Febrile neutropenia  
- Suspect neutropenic sepsis in patients with a history of recent systemic anticancer treatment who present with fever (with or without respiratory symptoms) as this can be rapid and life-threatening.[582]  
- Symptoms of COVID-19 and neutropenic sepsis may be difficult to differentiate at initial presentation.  
- CBC: neutropenia.  
- RT-PCR: negative for SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA.

### Criteria

#### Case definitions

Various case definitions are available:

- [WHO: public health surveillance for COVID-19 – interim guidance]
- [CDC: coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) 2020 interim case definition]
- [PHE: COVID-19 – investigation and initial clinical management of possible cases]
- [ECDC: case definition for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)]
Screening

Management of contacts

Definition

- The World Health Organization defines a contact as a person who has experienced any one of the following exposures during the 2 days before and the 14 days after the onset of symptoms of a probable or confirmed case:[583]
  - Face-to-face contact with a probable or confirmed case within 1 metre (3 feet) and for more than 15 minutes
  - Direct physical contact with a probable or confirmed case
  - Direct care for a patient with probable or confirmed COVID-19 without using recommended personal protective equipment
  - Other situations as indicated by local risk assessments.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines a close contact as someone who has been within 2 metres (6 feet) of an infected person for at least 15 minutes over a 24-hour period, beginning 2 days before symptom onset (or 2 days before testing in asymptomatic patients).[185]
- Consult local guidance as definitions of a contact may vary depending on local public health advice.

Quarantine periods

- Contacts should remain in quarantine at home and monitor their health for up to 14 days from the last day of possible contact with the infected person.
- In the UK, Public Health England recommends a 10-day quarantine (or self-isolation) period after a potential exposure (it was reduced from 14 days to 10 days on 14 December 2020).[584]
- The CDC has shortened the minimum quarantine time after a potential exposure from 14 days to 7-10 days. Quarantine can end after day 7 if the patient tests negative and no symptoms have been reported during the quarantine period. Quarantine can end after day 10 without testing and if no symptoms have been reported during the quarantine period. Additional criteria (e.g., symptom monitoring, mask wearing) should continue until day 14 in both cases.[585]
- Consult local guidance for recommended quarantine locations and timeframes as recommendations vary depending on local public health advice.

Screening of travellers

Exit and entry screening may be recommended in countries where borders are still open, particularly when repatriating nationals from affected areas. Travellers returning from affected areas should self-monitor for symptoms for 14 days and follow local protocols of the receiving country. Some countries may require travellers to enter mandatory quarantine in a designated location (e.g., a hotel). Travellers who develop symptoms are advised to contact their local healthcare provider, preferably by phone.[586] One study of 566 repatriated Japanese nationals from Wuhan City found that symptom-based screening performed poorly and missed presymptomatic and asymptomatic cases. This highlights the need for testing and follow-up.[587]

Drive-through screening centres

Drive-through screening centres have been set up in some countries for safer and more efficient screening. The testee does not leave their car throughout the entire process, which includes registration and questionnaire, examination, specimen collection, and instructions on what to do after. This method has the advantage of increased testing capacity and prevention of cross-infection between testees in the waiting space.[588]
Temperature screening

There is little scientific evidence to support temperature screening with thermal cameras or temperature screening products as a reliable method for the detection of COVID-19 or any other febrile illness, especially if used as the main method of testing.[589]

Non-contact infrared thermometers generally have reasonable sensitivity and specificity for detecting fever; however, their performance varies in different settings. Environmental factors (e.g., absolute temperature, variation in temperature, relative humidity) play an important role in the accuracy of the result. False negatives may be seen in people wearing make-up on the target area or who are significantly perspiring. False positives may be seen in people who are pregnant, menstruating, or on hormone replacement therapy, or those who have recently consumed alcohol or hot beverages, or done strenuous physical activity. Also, fever is not present in asymptomatic or presymptomatic people, and may not be present in symptomatic people, which means infected individuals could be missed.[590]

While the forehead is the most feasible site for scanning, it is thought to be more prone to physiological and environmental variations, and the wrist may be a better option as it may give more stable measurements under different circumstances.[591]

Non-contact infrared thermometers demonstrated variable accuracy levels across populations and had a low sensitivity for temperatures >37.5° (>99.5°) in adults compared with temporal artery thermometers. Therefore, they may not be the most accurate device for the mass screening of fever during a pandemic.[592]
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Management

Recommendations

Key Recommendations

Management predominantly depends on disease severity, and focuses on the following principles: isolation at a suitable location; infection prevention and control measures; symptom management; optimised supportive care; and organ support in severe or critical illness.

Consider whether the patient can be managed at home. Generally, patients with asymptomatic or mild disease can be managed at home or in a community facility.\[2\]

Admit patients with moderate or severe disease to an appropriate healthcare facility. Assess adults for frailty on admission. Patients with critical disease require intensive care; involve the critical care team in discussions about admission to critical care when necessary. Monitor patients closely for signs of disease progression.\[2\] [593]

Provide symptom relief as necessary. This may include treatments for fever, cough, breathlessness, anxiety, delirium, or agitation.\[2\] [594]

Start supportive care according to the clinical presentation. This might include oxygen therapy, intravenous fluids, venous thromboembolism prophylaxis, high-flow nasal oxygen, non-invasive or invasive mechanical ventilation, or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation. Sepsis and septic shock should be managed according to local protocols.\[2\]

Consider empirical antibiotics if there is clinical suspicion of bacterial infection. Antibiotics may be required in patients with moderate, severe, or critical disease. Give within 1 hour of initial assessment for patients with suspected sepsis or if the patient meets high-risk criteria. Base the regimen on the clinical diagnosis, local epidemiology and susceptibility data, and local treatment guidelines.\[2\] [561]

Consider systemic corticosteroid therapy for 7 to 10 days in adults with severe or critical disease. Moderate-quality evidence suggests that systemic corticosteroids probably reduce 28-day mortality in patients with severe and critical disease, and probably reduce the need for invasive ventilation.\[3\] [593] [595]

Assess whether the patient requires any rehabilitation or follow-up after discharge. Discontinue transmission-based precautions (including isolation) and release patients from the care pathway 10 days after symptom onset plus at least 3 days without fever and respiratory symptoms.\[2\]

Full Recommendations

Location of care

The decision about location of care depends on various factors including clinical presentation, disease severity, need for supportive care, presence of risk factors for severe disease, and conditions at home (including the presence of vulnerable people). Make the decision on a case-by-case basis using the following general principles.\[2\]

- **Mild disease**: manage in a healthcare facility, in a community facility, or at home. Home isolation can be considered in most patients, including asymptomatic patients.
Management

• **Moderate disease**: manage in a healthcare facility, in a community facility, or at home. Home isolation can be considered in low-risk patients (i.e., patients who are not at high risk of deterioration).
• **Severe disease**: manage in an appropriate healthcare facility.
• **Critical disease**: manage in an intensive/critical care unit.

The location of care will also depend on guidance from local health authorities and available resources. Forced quarantine orders are being used in some countries.

Manage people who require hospitalisation and who are at risk of being infected with a SARS-CoV-2 variant of concern in a single room with en-suite bathroom facilities and appropriate infection control procedures for the duration of their isolation period. In those who test positive, discuss further risk assessment and appropriate case management with the local/regional specialist infectious diseases centre.[186]

The strongest risk factors for hospital admission are older age (odds ratio of >2 for all age groups older than 44 years, and odds ratio of 37.9 for people aged 75 years and over), heart failure, male sex, chronic kidney disease, and increased body mass index (BMI).[596] The median time from onset of symptoms to hospital admission is around 7 days.[45] [517]

Children are less likely to require hospitalisation but, if admitted, generally only require supportive care.[21] [597] Risk factors for intensive care admission in children include age <1 month, male sex, pre-existing medical conditions, and presence of lower respiratory tract infection signs or symptoms at presentation.[598] The majority of children who require ventilation have underlying comorbidities, most commonly cardiac disease.[437] Children with COVID-19 are reported to have similar hospitalisation rates, intensive care admission rates, and mechanical ventilator use compared with those with seasonal influenza.[576]

Overall, 19% of hospitalised patients require non-invasive ventilation, 17% require intensive care, 9% require invasive ventilation, and 2% require extracorporeal membrane oxygenation.[518] The rate of intensive care admission varies between studies; however, a meta-analysis of nearly 25,000 patients found that the admission rate was 32%, and the pooled prevalence of mortality in patients in the intensive care unit was 39%.[599] Another more recent meta-analysis found the mortality rate in patients in the intensive care unit to be 35.5%.[600] The most common reasons for intensive care unit admission are hypoxaemic respiratory failure leading to mechanical ventilation and hypotension.[601] Patients admitted to intensive care units were older, were predominantly male, and had a median length of stay of 23 days (range 12 to 32 days).[602] The strongest risk factors for critical illness are oxygen saturation <88%; elevated serum troponin, C-reactive protein, and D-dimer; and, to a lesser extent, older age, BMI >40, heart failure, and male sex.[596] The most common risk factors for intensive care unit mortality were invasive mechanical ventilation, acute kidney injury, and acute respiratory distress syndrome.[603]

**Management of mild COVID-19**

Patients with suspected or confirmed mild disease (i.e., symptomatic patients meeting the case definition for COVID-19 without evidence of hypoxia or pneumonia) and asymptomatic patients should be isolated to contain virus transmission.[2]

**Location of care**
• Manage patients in a healthcare facility, in a community facility, or at home. Home isolation can be considered in most patients, with telemedicine or remote visits as appropriate.[2] [3] This decision requires careful clinical judgement and should be informed by an assessment of the patient’s home environment to ensure that: infection prevention and control measures and other requirements can be met (e.g., basic hygiene, adequate ventilation); the carer is able to provide care and recognise when the patient may be deteriorating; the carer has adequate support (e.g., food, supplies, psychological support); the support of a trained health worker is available in the community.[583]

Isolation period

• Discontinue transmission-based precautions (including isolation) and release patients from the care pathway: 10 days after positive test (asymptomatic patients); 10 days after symptom onset plus at least 3 days without fever and respiratory symptoms (symptomatic patients).[2]
• The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends discontinuing home isolation once at least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared, and at least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of antipyretics, and symptoms have improved, if a symptom-based strategy is used. In asymptomatic people, the CDC recommends discontinuing home isolation once at least 10 days have passed since the date of a positive test. Alternatively, the CDC recommends at least two negative reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) tests on respiratory specimens collected 24 hours apart before ending isolation if a test-based strategy is used.[604] If the patient is hospitalised, the CDC guidance for discontinuing isolation is the same as for moderate disease (see below).
• Guidance on when to stop isolation depends on local recommendations and may differ between countries. For example, in the UK the self-isolation period is 10 days in patients with milder disease who are managed in the community.[605]

Infection prevention and control

• For patients in home isolation, advise patients and household members to follow appropriate infection prevention and control measures:
  • [WHO: home care for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and management of their contacts]
  • [CDC: interim guidance for implementing home care of people not requiring hospitalization for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)]

Symptom management

• Fever and pain: paracetamol or ibuprofen are recommended.[2] [594] There is no evidence at present of severe adverse events in COVID-19 patients taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, or of effects as a result of the use of NSAIDs on acute healthcare utilisation, long-term survival, or quality of life in patients with COVID-19.[2] [594] [606] [607] [608] [609] [610] [611] [612] Ibuprofen should only be taken at the lowest effective dose for the shortest period needed to control symptoms.
• Cough: advise patients to avoid lying on their back as this makes coughing ineffective. Use simple measures (e.g., a teaspoon of honey in patients aged 1 year and older) to help cough.[594] A meta-analysis found that honey is superior to usual care (e.g., antitussives) for the improvement of upper respiratory tract infection symptoms, particularly cough frequency and severity.[613]
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Management

• Olfactory dysfunction: consider treatment (e.g., olfactory training) if olfactory dysfunction persists beyond 2 weeks. Often it improves spontaneously and does not require specific treatment. There is no evidence to support the use of treatments in patients with COVID-19.[614]

Supportive care

• Advise patients about adequate nutrition and appropriate rehydration. Too much fluid can worsen oxygenation.[2]
• Advise patients to improve air circulation by opening a window or door (fans can spread infection and should not be used).[594]
• Provide basic mental health and psychosocial support for all patients, and manage any symptoms of insomnia, depression, or anxiety as appropriate.[2]

Monitor

• Closely monitor patients with risk factors for severe illness, and counsel patients about signs and symptoms of deterioration or complications that require prompt urgent care (e.g., difficulty breathing, chest pain).[2][3]
• Pulse oximetry monitoring at home is recommended in symptomatic patients with risk factors for progression to severe disease who are not hospitalised. Patient education and appropriate follow-up are required.[2]

Management of moderate COVID-19

Patients with suspected or confirmed moderate disease (i.e., clinical signs of pneumonia but no signs of severe pneumonia) should be isolated to contain virus transmission.[2]

Location of care

• Manage patients in a healthcare facility, in a community facility, or at home. Home isolation, with telemedicine or remote visits as appropriate, can be considered in low-risk patients. Manage patients at high risk of deterioration in a healthcare facility.[2][3]

Isolation period

• Discontinue transmission-based precautions (including isolation) and release patients from the care pathway 10 days after symptom onset plus at least 3 days without fever and respiratory symptoms.[2]
• The CDC recommends discontinuing isolation once at least 10 days (not severely immunocompromised) or up to 20 days (severely immunocompromised) have passed since symptoms first appeared, and at least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of antipyretics, and symptoms have improved, if a symptom-based strategy is used. In asymptomatic people, the CDC recommends discontinuing isolation once at least 10 days (not severely immunocompromised) or up to 20 days (severely immunocompromised) have passed since the date of a positive test. Severely immunocompromised patients may produce replication-competent virus beyond 20 days and require additional testing and consultation with infectious diseases specialists and infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Alternatively, the CDC recommends at least two negative RT-PCR tests on respiratory specimens collected 24 hours apart before ending isolation if a test-based strategy is used. A symptom-based strategy is preferred; however, a test-based strategy can be considered in severely immunocompromised patients.[615] If
the patient is isolated at home, the CDC guidance for discontinuing isolation is the same as for mild disease (see above).

- Guidance on when to stop isolation depends on local recommendations and may differ between countries. For example, in the UK the isolation period is 14 days from a positive test in hospitalised patients, and 10 days in patients with milder disease who are managed in the community. Immunocompetent patients who tested positive on RT-PCR and have completed their 14-day isolation period are exempt from testing prior to hospital discharge if they are within 90 days from their initial illness onset or test, unless they develop new symptoms.[605]

**Infection prevention and control**

- Implement local infection prevention and control procedures when managing patients with COVID-19. For patients in home isolation, advise patients and household members to follow appropriate infection prevention and control measures (see above).

**Symptom management and supportive care**

- Manage symptoms and provide supportive care as appropriate (see above).

**Antibiotics**

- Consider empirical antibiotics if there is clinical suspicion of bacterial infection.[2] [3] Antibiotics may also be considered in older people (particularly those in long-term care facilities) and children <5 years of age to provide empirical antibiotic treatment for possible pneumonia.[2]

**Monitor**

- Closely monitor patients for signs or symptoms of disease progression.
- If the patient is being managed at home, counsel them about signs and symptoms of deterioration or complications that require prompt urgent care (e.g., difficulty breathing, chest pain). Pulse oximetry monitoring at home is recommended in symptomatic patients with risk factors for progression to severe disease who are not hospitalised. Patient education and appropriate follow-up are required.[2]
- If the patient is being managed in hospital, monitor patients closely for signs of clinical deterioration using medical early warning scores (e.g., National Early Warning Score 2 [NEWS2]), and respond immediately with appropriate supportive care interventions.[2]

**Corticosteroids**

- The WHO does not recommend corticosteroids in patients with non-severe disease as they may increase the risk of mortality in these patients.[595] In the UK, NHS England supports these guidelines, and does not recommend the use of corticosteroids in patients with non-severe COVID-19.[616] In the US, the National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends against the use of corticosteroids in non-hospitalised patients with mild to moderate disease.[3]

**Management of severe COVID-19**

Patients with suspected or confirmed severe disease are at risk of rapid clinical deterioration.[2]

- Severe disease in adults is defined as having clinical signs of pneumonia plus at least one of the following:
• Respiratory rate >30 breaths/minute
• Severe respiratory distress
• SpO₂ <90% on room air

• Severe disease in children is defined as having clinical signs of pneumonia plus at least one of the following:
  • Central cyanosis or SpO₂ <90%
  • Severe respiratory distress
  • General danger signs: inability to breastfeed or drink, lethargy or unconsciousness, or convulsions
  • Fast breathing (<2 months: ≥60 breaths per minute; 2-11 months: ≥50 breaths per minute; 1-5 years: ≥40 breaths per minute).

Location of care

• Manage patients in an appropriate healthcare facility under the guidance of a specialist team.[2]
• Assess all adults for frailty on admission to hospital, irrespective of age and COVID-19 status, using the Clinical Frailty Scale (CFS). [Clinical Frailty Scale] A meta-analysis found that an increase in CFS was associated with an increase in mortality (each 1-point increase in CFS was associated with a 12% increase in mortality).[617] However, some studies suggest that a more nuanced understanding of frailty and outcomes is needed, and you should exercise caution in placing too much emphasis on the influence of frailty alone when discussing prognosis in older people.[618]
• Involve critical care teams in discussions about admission to critical care for patients where:
  • The CFS score suggests the person is less frail (e.g., CFS <5), they are likely to benefit from critical care organ support, and the patient wants critical care treatment; or
  • The CFS score suggests the person is more frail (e.g., CFS ≥5), there is uncertainty regarding the benefit of critical care organ support, and critical care advice is needed to help the decision about treatment.
• Take into account the impact of underlying pathologies, comorbidities, and severity of acute illness.[593]

Isolation period

• Discontinue transmission-based precautions (including isolation) and release patients from the care pathway 10 days after symptom onset plus at least 3 days without fever and respiratory symptoms.[2]
• The CDC recommends discontinuing isolation once at least 10 days and up to 20 days have passed since symptoms first appeared, and at least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of antipyretics, and symptoms have improved, if a symptom-based strategy is used. Consider consultation with infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Severely immunocompromised patients may produce replication-competent virus beyond 20 days and require additional testing and consultation with infectious diseases specialists and infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Alternatively, the CDC recommends at least two negative RT-PCR tests on respiratory specimens collected 24 hours apart before ending isolation if a test-based strategy is used. A symptom-based strategy is preferred; however, a test-based strategy can be considered in severely immunocompromised patients.[615]
• Guidance on when to stop isolation depends on local recommendations and may differ between countries. For example, in the UK the isolation period is 14 days from a positive test in hospitalised patients. Immunocompetent patients who tested positive on RT-PCR and have completed their 14-day isolation period are exempt from testing prior to hospital discharge if they are within 90 days from their initial illness onset or test, unless they develop new symptoms.[605]

**Infection prevention and control**

• Implement local infection prevention and control procedures when managing patients with COVID-19.

**Oxygen**

• Start supplemental oxygen therapy immediately in any patient with emergency signs (i.e., obstructed or absent breathing, severe respiratory distress, central cyanosis, shock, coma and/or convulsions), or any patient without emergency signs and SpO₂ <90%.[2] [3] There is no evidence of benefit for oxygen therapy in patients with COVID-19 in the absence of hypoxaemia.[619]

• Target SpO₂ to ≥94% during resuscitation in adults and children with emergency signs who require emergency airway management and oxygen therapy. Once the patient is stable, a target SpO₂ >90% in children and non-pregnant adults, and ≥92% to 95% in pregnant women, is recommended. Nasal prongs or a nasal cannula are preferred in young children.[2] Some guidelines recommend that SpO₂ should be maintained no higher than 96%.[620]

• Some centres may recommend different SpO₂ targets in order to support prioritisation of oxygen flow for the most severely ill patients in hospital. NHS England recommends a target of 92% to 96% (or 90% to 94% if clinically appropriate), for example.[621]

• Consider positioning techniques (e.g., high supported sitting), and airway clearance management to optimise oxygenation assist with secretion clearance in adults. Consider awake prone positioning (for 8-12 hours/day, broken into shorter periods over the day) in severely ill patients who require supplemental oxygen.[2] [3] Early self-proning of awake, non-intubated patients has been shown to improve oxygen saturation and may delay or reduce the need for intensive care.[622] [623] [624] [625] [626]

• Monitor patients closely for signs of progressive acute hypoxaemic respiratory failure. Patients who continue to deteriorate despite standard oxygen therapy require advanced oxygen/ventilatory support.[2] [3]

**Symptom management and supportive care**

• Fluids and electrolytes: use cautious fluid management in adults and children without tissue hypoperfusion and fluid responsiveness as aggressive fluid resuscitation may worsen oxygenation.[2] Correct any electrolyte or metabolic abnormalities, such as hyperglycaemia or metabolic acidosis, according to local protocols.[627]

• Fever and pain: paracetamol or ibuprofen are recommended.[2] [594] There is no evidence at present of severe adverse events in COVID-19 patients taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, or of effects as a result of the use of NSAIDs on acute healthcare utilisation, long-term survival, or quality of life in patients with COVID-19.[606] [607] [608] [609] [610] [611] [612] Ibuprofen should only be taken at the lowest effective dose for the shortest period needed to control symptoms.

• Cough: advise patients to avoid lying on their back as this makes coughing ineffective. Use simple measures (e.g., a teaspoon of honey in patients aged 1 year and older) to help cough. Short-term use of a cough suppressant may be considered in select patients (e.g., if the cough is distressing
to the patient) provided there are no contraindications.[594] A meta-analysis found that honey is superior to usual care (e.g., antitussives) for the improvement of upper respiratory tract infection symptoms, particularly cough frequency and severity.[613]

- **Breathlessness:** keep the room cool, and encourage relaxation, breathing techniques, and changing body positions. Identify and treat any reversible causes of breathlessness (e.g., pulmonary oedema). Consider a trial of oxygen, if available. Consider an opioid and benzodiazepine combination in patients with moderate to severe breathlessness or patients who are distressed.[594]
- **Anxiety, delirium, and agitation:** identify and treat any underlying or reversible causes (e.g., offer reassurance, treat hypoxia, correct metabolic or endocrine abnormalities, address co-infections, minimise use of drugs that may cause or worsen delirium, treat substance withdrawal, maintain normal sleep cycles, treat pain or breathlessness).[2] [594] Consider a benzodiazepine for the management of anxiety or agitation that does not respond to other measures. Consider haloperidol or a phenothiazine for the management of delirium.[594] Low doses of haloperidol (or another suitable antipsychotic) can also be considered for agitation.[2] Non-pharmacological interventions are the mainstay for the management of delirium when possible, and prevention is key.[628]
- **Mouth care:** an important part of overall patient care in hospitalised patients who are ventilated or non-ventilated and those undergoing step-down or end-of-life care.[629]
- **Provide basic mental health and psychosocial support for all patients, and manage any symptoms of insomnia or depression as appropriate.[2]**

**Venous thromboembolism prophylaxis**

- **Assess the risk of bleeding as soon as possible after admission, or by the time of the first consultant review, using a suitable risk assessment tool.[630]**
- **Start venous thromboembolism (VTE) prophylaxis in acutely ill hospitalised adults and adolescents with COVID-19 as per the standard of care for other hospitalised patients without COVID-19, provided there are no contraindications. A COVID-19 diagnosis should not influence a paediatrician’s recommendations about VTE prophylaxis in hospitalised children. Pregnant women should be managed by a specialist.[2] [3] [631] [632] Start as soon as possible and within 14 hours of admission, and continue for the duration of the hospital stay or 7 days, whichever is longer.[630]**
- **Low molecular weight heparin, unfractionated heparin, or fondaparinux are the recommended options for standard thromboprophylaxis.[2] The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK recommends low molecular weight heparin first-line, with fondaparinux or unfractionated heparin reserved for patients who cannot have low molecular weight heparin.[630] Unfractionated heparin is contraindicated in patients with severe thrombocytopenia. Fondaparinux is recommended in patients with a history of heparin-induced thrombocytopenia. Direct oral anticoagulants are not recommended. Mechanical thromboprophylaxis (e.g., intermittent pneumatic compression devices) is recommended if anticoagulation is contraindicated or not available.[632] [633]**
- **The optimal dose is unknown. Standard prophylaxis doses are recommended over intermediate- or full treatment-dose regimens in patients without an established indication for higher-dose anticoagulation.[2] [630] [632] Some clinicians are using intermediate- or full treatment-dose regimens rather than prophylactic doses as they are worried about undetected thrombi; however, this may lead to major bleeding events.[634] There are insufficient data to recommend increased anticoagulant doses for VTE prophylaxis in COVID-19 patients outside the setting of a clinical trial.[3] However, some guidelines recommend that escalated doses can be considered in critically ill patients.[631] [635] The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK only
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Management recommends considering intermediate doses in patients who are having advanced respiratory support, and the decision should be based on multidisciplinary or senior opinion, or locally agreed protocols.[630] Reassess VTE and bleeding risks daily in these patients.[630] NHS England recommends that therapeutic doses should not be offered unless there is a standard indication for therapeutic anticoagulation, as trials show that therapeutic doses do not improve clinical outcome of severe disease in the critical care setting.[636] Dose adjustments may be required in patients with extremes of body weight or renal impairment.[630]

- For patients who are already on an anticoagulant for another condition, continue the patient’s current therapeutic dose unless contraindicated by a change in clinical circumstances. Consider switching to low molecular weight heparin if the patient’s clinical condition is deteriorating and the patient is not currently on low molecular weight heparin.[630]
- Monitor patients for signs and symptoms suggestive of thromboembolism and proceed with appropriate diagnostic and management pathways if clinically suspected.[2] If the patient’s clinical condition changes, assess the risk of VTE, reassess the bleeding risk, and review VTE prophylaxis.[630]
- Continue until hospital discharge.[2] Routine post-discharge VTE prophylaxis is not generally recommended, except in certain high-risk patients.[3] [631] [632] Ensure patients who require VTE prophylaxis after discharge are able to use it correctly or have arrangements made for someone to help them.[630]
- There is currently insufficient evidence to determine the risks and benefits of prophylactic anticoagulation in hospitalised patients with COVID-19.[637] A retrospective analysis of over 4000 patients found that anticoagulation was associated with lower mortality and intubation among hospitalised COVID-19 patients. Therapeutic anticoagulation was associated with lower mortality compared with prophylactic anticoagulation, but the difference was not statistically significant.[638] An observational cohort study of over 4000 patients found that early initiation of prophylactic anticoagulation in hospitalised patients was associated with a decreased risk of 30-day mortality and no increased risk of serious bleeding events compared with no anticoagulation.[639] Clinicians should rely on pre-COVID-19 evidence-based principles of anticoagulation management combined with rational approaches to address clinical challenges.[631]

Antimicrobials

- Consider empirical antibiotics if there is clinical suspicion of bacterial infection. Give within 1 hour of initial assessment for patients with suspected sepsis or if the patient meets high-risk criteria (or within 4 hours of establishing a diagnosis of pneumonia); do not wait for microbiology results. Base the regimen on the clinical diagnosis (e.g., community-acquired pneumonia, hospital-acquired pneumonia, sepsis), local epidemiology and susceptibility data, and local treatment guidelines.[2] [3] [561]
- Some guidelines recommend empirical antibiotics for bacterial pathogens in all patients with community-acquired pneumonia without confirmed COVID-19. It is likely that the bacterial pathogens in patients with COVID-19 and pneumonia are the same as in previous patients with community-acquired pneumonia, and therefore empirical antimicrobial recommendations should be the same.[562] However, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK recommends that it is reasonable not to start empirical antimicrobials if you are confident that the clinical features are typical for COVID-19.[561] There is insufficient evidence to recommend empirical broad-spectrum antimicrobials in the absence of another indication.[3]
- Some patients may require continued antibiotic therapy once COVID-19 has been confirmed depending on the clinical circumstances (e.g., clinical or microbiological evidence of bacterial
infection regardless of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 [SARS-CoV-2] test results, SARS-CoV-2 test result is positive but clinical features are not typical for COVID-19.

In these circumstances, review antibiotic choice based on microbiology results and switch to a narrower-spectrum antibiotic if appropriate, review intravenous antibiotic use within 48 hours and consider switching to oral therapy, and give for a total of 5 days unless there is a clear indication to continue.[561]

• Reassess antibiotic use daily. De-escalate empirical therapy on the basis of microbiology results and clinical judgement. Regularly review the possibility of switching from intravenous to oral therapy. Duration of treatment should be as short as possible (e.g., 5 to 7 days). Antibiotic stewardship programmes should be in place.[2] A meta-analysis found that the prevalence of antibiotic prescribing in patients with COVID-19 was 75%, which is significantly higher than the estimated prevalence of bacterial co-infection. Therefore, unnecessary antibiotic use is likely to be high in these patients.[640]

• Treat laboratory-confirmed co-infections (e.g., malaria, tuberculosis, influenza) as appropriate according to local protocols.[2] The treatment of influenza is the same in all patients regardless of SARS-CoV-2 co-infection. Start empirical treatment with oseltamivir in hospitalised patients who are suspected of having either or both infections as soon as possible without waiting for influenza test results. Antiviral therapy can be stopped once influenza has been ruled out.[3]

Corticosteroids

• The WHO strongly recommends systemic corticosteroid therapy (low-dose intravenous or oral dexamethasone or hydrocortisone) for 7 to 10 days in adults with severe or critical disease. This recommendation is based on two meta-analyses that pooled data from eight randomised trials (over 7000 patients), including the UK RECOVERY trial. Moderate-quality evidence suggests that systemic corticosteroids probably reduce 28-day mortality in patients with severe and critical disease. They also probably reduce the need for invasive ventilation. There is no evidence directly comparing dexamethasone and hydrocortisone. The harms of treatment in this context are considered to be minor. It is unclear whether these recommendations can be applied to children or those who are immunocompromised. The WHO does not recommend corticosteroids in patients with non-severe disease as they may increase the risk of mortality in these patients.[595] [641] [642] There is also evidence that corticosteroids probably reduce the length of intensive care unit stay (low certainty), and increase ventilator-free days (moderate certainty).[643] [644]

• In the UK, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends dexamethasone or hydrocortisone in patients with severe or critical COVID-19 (in line with WHO guidance). The marketing authorisations cover this indication in the UK.[593] [NICE: COVID-19 prescribing brief – corticosteroids]

• In Europe, the European Medicines Agency has endorsed the use of dexamethasone for patients with severe disease who require oxygen therapy or mechanical ventilation.[645]

• In the US, the National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends dexamethasone, either alone or in combination with remdesivir (see the [Emerging] section for information on remdesivir), in hospitalised patients who require supplemental oxygen. The panel recommends against using dexamethasone in patients who do not require supplemental oxygen. Alternative corticosteroids may be used in situations where dexamethasone is not available.[3] The Infectious Diseases Society of America supports the use of dexamethasone in hospitalised patients with severe disease.[646]

• Monitor patients for adverse effects (e.g., hyperglycaemia, secondary infections, psychiatric effects, reactivation of latent infections) and assess for drug-drug interactions.[3] Follow local policies
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Management

on gastroprotection during corticosteroid treatment. Clinically significant interactions between remdesivir and corticosteroids are unlikely; however, lopinavir/ritonavir may increase hydrocortisone concentrations.[593]

- Inhaled corticosteroids (e.g., budesonide) are also undergoing clinical trials.[647]

Recommendations and evidence for the use of corticosteroids in hospitalised patients with COVID-19

_Mann et al._ 2020;370:m3379

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Monitor

- Monitor patients closely for signs of clinical deterioration, and respond immediately with appropriate supportive care interventions.[2]

Discharge and rehabilitation

- Routinely assess older patients for mobility, functional swallow, cognitive impairment, and mental health concerns, and based on that assessment determine whether the patient is ready for discharge, and whether the patient has any rehabilitation and follow-up requirements.[2]

Palliative care

- Palliative care interventions should be made accessible at each institution that provides care for patients with COVID-19. Identify whether the patient has an advance care plan and respect the patient’s priorities and preferences when formulating the patient’s care plan.[2] Follow local palliative care guidelines.

Management of critical COVID-19

Patients with critical disease (i.e., presence of acute respiratory distress syndrome, sepsis, or septic shock) should be admitted or transferred to an intensive/critical care unit. Use existing care bundles (i.e., three or more evidence-informed practices delivered together and consistently to improve care), chosen locally by the hospital or intensive care unit and adapted as necessary for local circumstances.[2]

Location of care

- Manage patients in an intensive/critical care unit under the guidance of a specialist team.[2]
- Discuss the risks, benefits, and potential outcomes of treatment options with patients and their families, and allow them to express preferences about their management. Take their wishes and expectations into account when considering the ceiling of treatment. Use decision support tools if available. Put treatment escalation plans in place, and discuss any existing advance care plans or advance decisions to refuse treatment with patients who have pre-existing advanced comorbidities.[594]

Isolation period

- Discontinue transmission-based precautions (including isolation) and release patients from the care pathway 10 days after symptom onset plus at least 3 days without fever and respiratory symptoms.[2]
- The CDC recommends discontinuing isolation once at least 10 days and up to 20 days have passed since symptoms first appeared, and at least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of antipyretics, and symptoms have improved, if a symptom-based strategy is used. Consider consultation with infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Severely immunocompromised patients may produce replication-competent virus beyond 20 days and require additional testing and consultation with infectious diseases specialists and infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Alternatively, the CDC recommends at least two negative RT-PCR tests on respiratory specimens collected 24 hours apart before ending isolation if a test-based strategy is used. A symptom-based strategy is preferred; however, a test-based strategy can be considered in severely immunocompromised patients.[615]
• Guidance on when to stop isolation depends on local recommendations and may differ between countries. For example, in the UK the isolation period is 14 days from a positive test in hospitalised patients. Immunocompetent patients who tested positive on RT-PCR and have completed their 14-day isolation period are exempt from testing prior to hospital discharge if they are within 90 days from their initial illness onset or test, unless they develop new symptoms.[605]

Infection prevention and control

• Implement local infection prevention and control procedures when managing patients with COVID-19.

High-flow nasal oxygen or non-invasive ventilation

• Consider a trial of high-flow nasal oxygen (HFNO) or non-invasive ventilation (e.g., continuous positive airway pressure [CPAP] or bilevel positive airway pressure [BiPAP]) in selected patients with mild acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS). Consider awake prone positioning (for 8-12 hours/day, broken into shorter periods over the day) in severely ill patients who require HFNO or non-invasive ventilation.[2]
• Airborne precautions are recommended for these interventions (including bubble CPAP) due to uncertainty about the potential for aerosolisation.[2] Novel methods to protect clinicians without access to standard personal protective equipment during aerosol-generating procedures have been suggested.[648] [649] [650] [651]
• Patients with hypercapnia, haemodynamic instability, multi-organ failure, or abnormal mental status should generally not receive HFNO, although emerging data suggests that it may be safe in patients with mild to moderate and non-worsening hypercapnia. Patients with hypoxaemic respiratory failure and haemodynamic instability, multi-organ failure, or abnormal mental status should not receive these treatments in place of other options such as invasive ventilation.[2]
• There is ongoing debate about the optimal mode of respiratory support before mechanical ventilation.[652] NHS England recommends CPAP as the preferred form of non-invasive ventilation in patients with hypoxaemic (type 1) respiratory failure. It doesn't advocate the use of HFNO based on a lack of efficacy, oxygen use (HFNO can place a strain on oxygen supplies with the risk of site supply failure), and infection spread.[653] Other guidelines recommend HFNO over non-invasive ventilation, unless HFNO is not available.[3] [620] Despite the trend to avoid HFNO, it has been shown to have a similar risk of aerosol generation to standard oxygen masks.[654]
• Early CPAP may provide a bridge to invasive mechanical ventilation. Reserve the use of BiPAP for patients with hypercapnic acute on chronic ventilatory failure (type 2 respiratory failure).[653]
• Indirect and low-certainty evidence suggests that non-invasive ventilation probably reduces mortality in patients with COVID-19, similar to mechanical ventilation, but may increase the risk of viral transmission.[655] [656]
• Monitor patients closely for acute deterioration. If patients do not improve after a short trial of these interventions, they require urgent endotracheal intubation.[2] [620]
• More detailed guidance on the management of ARDS in COVID-19 is beyond the scope of this topic; consult a specialist for further guidance.

Mechanical ventilation

• Consider endotracheal intubation and invasive mechanical ventilation in patients who are acutely deteriorating despite advanced oxygen/non-invasive ventilatory support measures.[2] [3]
• Two-thirds of patients who required critical care in the UK had mechanical ventilation within 24 hours of admission.[657] In New York, 33% of hospitalised patients developed respiratory failure
leading to mechanical ventilation. These patients were more likely to be male, have obesity, and have elevated inflammatory markers and liver function tests.[415] Patients spent an average of 18 days on a ventilator (range 9-28 days).[658] Patients who required invasive mechanical ventilation had an 36% to 88% mortality rate in studies.[659] [660] [661]

- Endotracheal intubation should be performed by an experienced provider using airborne precautions.[2] Intubation by video laryngoscopy is recommended if possible.[3] Young children, or adults who are obese or pregnant, may desaturate quickly during intubation and therefore require pre-oxygenation with 100% FiO₂ for 5 minutes.[2]

- Mechanically ventilated patients with ARDS should receive a lung-protective, low tidal volume/low inspiratory pressure ventilation strategy (lower targets are recommended in children). A higher positive end-expiratory pressure (PEEP) strategy is preferred over a lower PEEP strategy in moderate to severe ARDS. However, individualisation of PEEP, where the patient is monitored for beneficial or harmful effects and driving pressure during titration with consideration of the risks and benefits of PEEP titration, is recommended.[2] [3] [620] NHS England recommends a low PEEP strategy in patients with normal compliance where recruitment may not be required.[662]

- Although some patients with COVID-19 pneumonia meet the criteria for ARDS, there is some discussion about whether COVID-19 pneumonia is its own specific disease with atypical phenotypes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the main characteristic of the atypical presentation is the dissociation between well-preserved lung mechanics and the severity of hypoxaemia.[663] [664] [665] [666] [667] [668] However, this approach has been criticised.[669] [670] It has been argued that an evidence-based approach extrapolating data from ARDS not related to COVID-19 is the most reasonable approach for intensive care of COVID-19 patients.[671] As a consequence of this, some clinicians have warned that protocol-driven ventilator use may be causing lung injury in some patients, and that ventilator settings should be based on physiological findings rather than using standard protocols. High PEEP may have a detrimental effect on patients with normal compliance.[663] PEEP should always be carefully titrated.[672]

- Consider prone ventilation in patients with severe ARDS for 12 to 16 hours per day. Pregnant women in the third trimester may benefit from being placed in the lateral decubitus position. Caution is required in children.[2] [3] [620] Longer durations may be feasible in some patients.[673] A small cohort study of 12 patients in Wuhan City, China, with COVID-19-related ARDS suggests that spending periods of time in the prone position may improve lung recruitability.[674] Two small case series found that many people tolerate the prone position while awake, breathing spontaneously, or receiving non-invasive ventilation. In the patients who tolerated it, improvement in oxygenation and a decrease in respiratory rate occurred.[675] [676]

- Lung recruitment manoeuvres are suggested, but staircase recruitment manoeuvres are not recommended.[3] [620]

- More detailed guidance on the management of ARDS in COVID-19, including sedation and the use of neuromuscular blockade during ventilation, is beyond the scope of this topic; consult a specialist for further guidance.

**Inhaled pulmonary vasodilator**

- Consider a trial of an inhaled pulmonary vasodilator in adults who have severe ARDS and hypoxaemia despite optimising ventilation. Taper off if there is no rapid improvement in oxygenation.[3] [620]

**Extracorporeal membrane oxygenation**
• Consider extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) according to availability and expertise if the above methods fail.\[2\] [620] [677] [678] ECMO is not suitable for all patients, and only those who meet certain inclusion criteria may be considered for ECMO.\[679\]
• There is insufficient evidence to recommend either for or against the routine use of ECMO.\[3\]
• The estimated 60-day survival rate of ECMO-rescued patients with COVID-19 (31%) was similar to that of previous studies of ECMO for severe ARDS.\[680\] An international cohort study of 1035 patients found that both the estimated mortality 90 days after ECMO initiation and mortality in those who achieved a final outcome of death or discharge were <40%, consistent with previously reported survival rates in acute hypoxaemic respiratory failure.\[681\]
• Single-access, dual-stage venovenous ECMO with early extubation appears to be safe and effective in patients with COVID-19 respiratory failure.\[682\]

Management of septic shock/sepsis

• The management of sepsis and septic shock in patients with COVID-19 is beyond the scope of this topic. See the [Complications] section.

Symptom management and supportive care

• Consider fluid and electrolyte management, antimicrobial treatment, VTE prophylaxis, and symptom management as appropriate (see above).
• Unfractionated heparin is preferred over fondaparinux in critically ill patients if low molecular weight heparin cannot be used.\[632\] Some guidelines recommend that escalated doses can be considered in critically ill patients.\[631\] [635] The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK only recommends considering intermediate doses in patients who are having advanced respiratory support, and the decision should be based on multidisciplinary or senior opinion, or locally agreed protocols. Reassess VTE and bleeding risks daily in these patients.\[630\] NHS England recommends that therapeutic doses should not be offered unless there is a standard indication for therapeutic anticoagulation, as trials show that therapeutic doses do not improve clinical outcome of severe disease in the critical care setting.\[636\]

Corticosteroids

• Consider systemic corticosteroids for the management of critically ill patients (see above). In the US, the National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends dexamethasone, either alone or in combination with remdesivir, in hospitalised patients who require high-flow oxygen or non-invasive ventilation. The panel recommends dexamethasone alone in patients on mechanical ventilation or ECMO.\[3\]
• A meta-analysis found an increased risk of VTE with corticosteroid administration in patients with critical disease. However, no definite findings were available due to the differing corticosteroid regimens and the heterogeneity of the studies.\[683\]

Discharge and rehabilitation

• Routinely assess intensive care patients for mobility, functional swallow, cognitive impairment, and mental health concerns, and based on that assessment determine whether the patient is ready for discharge, and whether the patient has any rehabilitation and follow-up requirements.\[2\]

Palliative care
• Palliative care interventions should be made accessible at each institution that provides care for patients with COVID-19. Identify whether the patient has an advance care plan and respect the patient’s priorities and preferences when formulating the patient’s care plan.[2] Follow local palliative care guidelines.

Management of pregnant women

Pregnant women should be managed by a multidisciplinary team, including obstetric, perinatal, neonatal, and intensive care specialists, as well as midwifery and mental health and psychosocial support. A woman-centred, respectful, skilled approach to care is recommended.[2] In women with severe or critical disease, the multidisciplinary team should be organised as soon as possible after maternal hypoxaemia occurs in order to assess fetal maturity, disease progression, and the best options for delivery.[684]

There are limited data available on the management of pregnant women with COVID-19; however, pregnant women can generally be treated with the same supportive therapies detailed above, taking into account the physiological changes that occur with pregnancy.[2]

The prevalence of asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2-positive pregnant women admitted for delivery appears to be low (<3% in a cohort in Connecticut, and 0.43% in a cohort in California).[685] [686] Screening women and their delivery partners before admission may not be helpful. More than 15% of asymptomatic maternity patients tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 infection despite having been screened negative using a telephone screening tool in one small observational study in New York. In addition to this, 58% of their asymptomatic support persons tested positive despite being screened negative.[687] Another study in a New York obstetric population found that 88% of women who tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 at admission were asymptomatic at presentation.[688]

Location of care

• Manage pregnant women in a healthcare facility, in a community facility, or at home. Women with suspected or confirmed mild disease may not require acute care in a hospital unless there is concern for rapid deterioration or an inability to return to hospital promptly.[2] Follow local infection prevention and control procedures as for non-pregnant people.
• Consider home care in women with asymptomatic or mild illness, provided the patient has no signs of potentially severe illness (e.g., breathlessness, haemoptysis, new chest pain/pressure, anorexia, dehydration, confusion), no comorbidities, and no obstetric issues; the patient is able to care for herself; and monitoring and follow-up is possible. Otherwise, manage pregnant women in a hospital setting with appropriate maternal and fetal monitoring whenever possible.[492] [689] [690]
• Postpone routine antenatal or postnatal health visits for women who are in home isolation and reschedule them after the isolation period is completed. Delivery of counselling and care should be conducted via telemedicine whenever possible. Counsel women about healthy diet, mobility and exercise, intake of micronutrients, smoking, and alcohol and substance use. Advise women to seek urgent care if they develop any worsening of illness or danger signs, or danger signs of pregnancy.[2]
• The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has published an algorithm to help decide whether hospital admission or home care is more appropriate. [ACOG: outpatient assessment and management for pregnant women with suspected or confirmed novel coronavirus (COVID-19)]

Antenatal corticosteroids
• Consider antenatal corticosteroids for fetal lung maturation in women who are at risk of preterm birth (24 to 37 weeks’ gestation). Caution is advised because corticosteroids could potentially worsen the maternal clinical condition, and the decision should be made in conjunction with the multidisciplinary team.[492] [690] [691] The WHO recommends antenatal corticosteroids only when there is no clinical evidence of maternal infection and adequate childbirth and newborn care is available, and in women with mild COVID-19 after assessing the risks and benefits.[2]
• There is no evidence that corticosteroids in the doses prescribed for fetal lung maturation cause any harm in the context of COVID-19, but there is also no evidence of safety. The unknown effect on maternal outcome should be weighed against the neonatal benefit, particularly at later preterm gestations.[692]

**Treatments**

• Most clinical trials to date have excluded pregnant women. However, potentially effective treatments should not be withheld from pregnant women due to theoretical concerns about the safety of these therapeutic agents in pregnancy. Decisions should be made with a shared decision-making process between the patient and the clinical team.[3]
• There is no convincing evidence that systemic corticosteroids increase the incidence of congenital abnormalities. The benefits of corticosteroids in pregnant or breastfeeding women with severe or critical disease are thought to outweigh the risks.[593]

**VTE prophylaxis**

• The National Institutes of Health recommends prophylactic dose anticoagulation in pregnant women who are hospitalised with severe disease, provided there are no contraindications to its use. Anticoagulation during labour and delivery requires specialised care and planning, and should be managed in a similar way to pregnant women with other conditions that require anticoagulation. VTE prophylaxis after discharge is not recommended.[3]
• The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) has also published guidance on the prevention of VTE in pregnant women.[692]

**Labour and delivery**

• Implement local infection prevention and control measures during labour and delivery. Screen birth partners for COVID-19 infection using the standard case definition.[2]
• Individualise mode of birth based on obstetric indications and the woman’s preferences. Vaginal delivery is preferred in women with confirmed infection to avoid unnecessary surgical complications. Induction of labour, interventions to accelerate labour and delivery, and caesarean delivery are generally only recommended when medically justified based on maternal and fetal condition. COVID-19 positive status alone is not an indication for caesarean section.[2] [492] [690] Avoid using birthing pools in patients with suspected or confirmed infection.[692]
• Delayed umbilical cord clamping (not earlier than 1 minute after birth) is recommended for improved maternal and infant health and nutrition outcomes. The risk of transmission via blood is thought to be minimal, and there is no evidence that delayed cord clamping increases the risk of viral transmission from the mother to the newborn.[2]
• Consider babies born to mothers with suspected or confirmed infection to be a person under investigation and isolate them from healthy newborns. Test them for infection 24 hours after birth, and, if negative, again 48 hours after birth.[693]

**Newborn care**
Management of people living with HIV

Recommendations for the triage, management, and treatment of COVID-19 in people with HIV are the same as those for the general population. Continue antiretroviral therapy and prophylaxis for opportunistic infections whenever possible, including patients who require hospitalisation. Consult with a HIV specialist before adjusting or switching antiretroviral medications, and pay attention to potential drug-drug interactions and overlapping toxicities with COVID-19 treatments. [3]
Management of co-existing conditions

Best Practice has published a separate topic on the management of co-existing conditions in the context of COVID-19. [BMJ Best Practice: management of co-existing conditions in the context of COVID-19]

Treatment algorithm overview

Please note that formulations/routes and doses may differ between drug names and brands, drug formularies, or locations. Treatment recommendations are specific to patient groups: see disclaimer
## Coronaviruses disease 2019 (COVID-19)

### Management

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Treatment algorithm

Please note that formulations/routes and doses may differ between drug names and brands, drug formularies, or locations. Treatment recommendations are specific to patient groups: see disclaimer.
Acute

mild COVID-19

1st consider home isolation

» Patients with suspected or confirmed mild disease (i.e., symptomatic patients meeting the case definition for COVID-19 without evidence of hypoxia or pneumonia) and asymptomatic patients should be isolated to contain virus transmission.[2]

» Manage patients in a healthcare facility, in a community facility, or at home. Home isolation can be considered in most patients, with telemedicine or remote visits as appropriate.[2] [3] This decision requires careful clinical judgement and should be informed by an assessment of the patient’s home environment to ensure that: infection prevention and control measures and other requirements can be met (e.g., basic hygiene, adequate ventilation); the carer is able to provide care and recognise when the patient may be deteriorating; the carer has adequate support (e.g., food, supplies, psychological support); the support of a trained health worker is available in the community.[583] The location of care will depend on guidance from local health authorities and available resources.

» Pregnant women with suspected or confirmed mild disease may not require acute care in a hospital unless there is concern for rapid deterioration or an inability to return to hospital promptly.[2]

» Advise patients and household members to follow appropriate infection prevention and control measures:

   » [WHO: home care for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and management of their contacts]

   » [CDC: interim guidance for implementing home care of people not requiring hospitalization for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)]

» Discontinue transmission-based precautions (including isolation) and release patients from the care pathway: 10 days after positive test (asymptomatic patients); 10 days after symptom onset plus at least 3 days without fever and respiratory symptoms (symptomatic patients).[2] The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends discontinuing home isolation once at least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared, and
### Acute

At least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of antipyretics, and symptoms have improved, if a symptom-based strategy is used. In asymptomatic people, the CDC recommends discontinuing home isolation once at least 10 days have passed since the date of a positive test. Alternatively, the CDC recommends at least two negative reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) tests on respiratory specimens collected 24 hours apart before ending isolation if a test-based strategy is used.[604] If the patient is hospitalised, CDC guidance for discontinuing isolation is the same as for moderate disease (see below). Guidance on when to stop isolation depends on local recommendations and may differ between countries. For example, in the UK the isolation period is 10 days in patients with milder disease who are managed in the community.[605]

#### Plus Monitoring

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

- Closely monitor patients with risk factors for severe illness and counsel patients about signs and symptoms of deterioration or complications that require prompt urgent care (e.g., difficulty breathing, chest pain).[2] [3]

- Pulse oximetry monitoring at home is recommended in symptomatic patients with risk factors for progression to severe disease who are not hospitalised. Patient education and appropriate follow-up are required.[2]

#### Plus Symptom Management and Supportive Care

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

- Advise patients to avoid lying on their back as this makes coughing ineffective. Use simple measures (e.g., a teaspoon of honey in patients aged 1 year and older) to help cough.[594] A meta-analysis found that honey is superior to usual care (e.g., antitussives) for the improvement of upper respiratory tract infection symptoms, particularly cough frequency and severity.[613]

- Advise patients about adequate nutrition and appropriate rehydration. Too much fluid can worsen oxygenation.[2]
Acute

» Advise patients to improve air circulation by opening a window or door (fans can spread infection and should not be used).[594]

» Provide basic mental health and psychosocial support for all patients, and manage any symptoms of insomnia, depression, or anxiety as appropriate.[2]

» Consider treatment for olfactory dysfunction (e.g., olfactory training) if it persists beyond 2 weeks. There is no evidence to support the use of these treatments in patients with COVID-19.[614]

consider antipyretic/analgesic

Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group

Primary options

» paracetamol: children: consult local drug formulary for guidance on dose; adults: 500-1000 mg orally every 4-6 hours when required, maximum 4000 mg/day

OR

» ibuprofen: children: consult local drug formulary for guidance on dose; adults: 300-600 mg orally (immediate-release) every 6-8 hours when required, maximum 2400 mg/day

» Paracetamol or ibuprofen are recommended.[2] [594] There is no evidence at present of severe adverse events in COVID-19 patients taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, or of effects as a result of the use of NSAIDs on acute healthcare utilisation, long-term survival, or quality of life in patients with COVID-19.[606] [607] [608] [609] [610] [611] [612]

» Ibuprofen should only be taken at the lowest effective dose for the shortest period needed to control symptoms. It is not recommended in pregnant women (especially in the third trimester) or children <6 months of age (age cut-offs vary by country).

consider experimental therapies

Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group

» Consider appropriate experimental or emerging therapies.
Acute

- Antiviral therapies will have a greater effect early in the course of the disease, whereas immunosuppressive/anti-inflammatory therapies are likely to have a greater effect later in the course of the disease.[3]
- See the [Emerging] section for more information.

Moderate COVID-19

1st consider home isolation or hospital admission

- Patients with suspected or confirmed moderate disease (i.e., clinical signs of pneumonia but no signs of severe pneumonia) should be isolated to contain virus transmission.[2]
- Manage patients in a healthcare facility, in a community facility, or at home. Home isolation, with telemedicine or remote visits as appropriate, can be considered in low-risk patients. Manage patients at high risk of deterioration and pregnant women in a healthcare facility.[2] [3]
- Implement local infection prevention and control procedures when managing patients with COVID-19. For patients in home isolation, advise patients and household members to follow appropriate infection prevention and control measures:
  - [WHO: home care for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and management of their contacts]
  - [CDC: interim guidance for implementing home care of people not requiring hospitalization for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)]
- Discontinue transmission-based precautions (including isolation) and release patients from the care pathway 10 days after symptom onset plus at least 3 days without fever and respiratory symptoms.[2] [615] The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends discontinuing isolation once at least 10 days (not severely immunocompromised) or up to 20 days (severely immunocompromised) have passed since symptoms first appeared, and at least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of antipyretics, and symptoms have improved, if a symptom-based strategy is used. In asymptomatic people, the CDC recommends discontinuing isolation once at least 10 days (not severely immunocompromised) or up to 20 days (severely immunocompromised) have passed since the date of a positive test. Severely
Acute immunocompromised patients may produce replication-competent virus beyond 20 days and require additional testing and consultation with infectious diseases specialists and infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Alternatively, the CDC recommends at least two negative reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) tests on respiratory specimens collected 24 hours apart before ending isolation if a test-based strategy is used. A symptom-based strategy is preferred; however, a test-based strategy can be considered in severely immunocompromised patients.\(^{[615]}\) If the patient is isolated at home, CDC guidance for discontinuing isolation is the same as for mild disease (see above). Guidance on when to stop isolation depends on local recommendations and may differ between countries. For example, in the UK the isolation period is 14 days from a positive test in hospitalised patients, and 10 days in patients with milder disease who are managed in the community. Immunocompetent patients who tested positive on RT-PCR and have completed their 14-day isolation period are exempt from testing prior to hospital discharge if they are within 90 days from their initial illness onset or test, unless they develop new symptoms.\(^{[605]}\)

**plus monitoring**

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

» Closely monitor patients for signs or symptoms of disease progression. If the patient is being managed at home, counsel them about signs and symptoms of deterioration or complications that require prompt urgent care (e.g., difficulty breathing, chest pain). Pulse oximetry monitoring at home is recommended in symptomatic patients with risk factors for progression to severe disease who are not hospitalised. Patient education and appropriate follow-up are required. If the patient is being managed in hospital, monitor patients closely for signs of clinical deterioration using medical early warning scores (e.g., National Early Warning Score 2 [NEWS2]), and respond immediately with appropriate supportive care interventions.\(^{[2]}\)

**plus symptom management and supportive care**

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

» Advise patients to avoid lying on their back as this makes coughing ineffective. Use simple measures (e.g., a teaspoon of honey
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Management

Acute

- Consider antibiotics
  - Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group
  - Consider empirical antibiotics if there is clinical suspicion of bacterial infection.[2] [3]
  - Antibiotics may also be considered in older people (particularly those in long-term care facilities) and children <5 years of age to provide empirical antibiotic treatment for possible pneumonia. The regimen should be based on the clinical diagnosis, local epidemiology and susceptibility data, and local treatment guidelines.[2]

- Consider antipyretic/analgesic
  - Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group
  - Primary options
    - Paracetamol: children: consult local drug formulary for guidance on dose; adults: 500-1000 mg orally every 4-6 hours when required, maximum 4000 mg/day
    - Ibuprofen: children: consult local drug formulary for guidance on dose; adults: 300-600 mg orally (immediate-release) every
### Acute

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- Paracetamol or ibuprofen are recommended.[2] [594] There is no evidence at present of severe adverse events in COVID-19 patients taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, or of effects as a result of the use of NSAIDs on acute healthcare utilisation, long-term survival, or quality of life in patients with COVID-19.[606] [607] [608] [609] [610] [611] [612]

- Ibuprofen should only be taken at the lowest effective dose for the shortest period needed to control symptoms. It is not recommended in pregnant women (especially in the third trimester) or children <6 months of age (age cut-offs vary by country).

### Consider experimental therapies

Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group

- Consider appropriate experimental or emerging therapies.

- Antiviral therapies will have a greater effect early in the course of the disease, whereas immunosuppressive/anti-inflammatory therapies are likely to have a greater effect later in the course of the disease.[3]

- See the [Emerging] section for more information.

### Severe COVID-19

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- Patients with suspected or confirmed severe disease are at risk of rapid clinical deterioration and should be admitted to an appropriate healthcare facility under the guidance of a specialist team. Severe disease in adults is defined as having clinical signs of pneumonia plus at least one of the following: respiratory rate >30 breaths/minute, severe respiratory distress, or SpO₂ <90% on room air. Severe disease in children is defined as having clinical signs of pneumonia plus at least one of the following: central cyanosis or SpO₂ <90%, severe respiratory distress, general danger signs (inability to breastfeed or drink, lethargy or unconsciousness, or convulsions), or fast breathing (<2 months: ≥60 breaths per minute; 2-11 months: ≥50 breaths per minute; 1-5 years: ≥40 breaths per minute).[2]
### Acute

- Assess all adults for frailty on admission to hospital, irrespective of age and COVID-19 status, using the Clinical Frailty Scale (CFS). [Clinical Frailty Scale](#)  
  - Involve critical care teams in discussions about admission to critical care. [593] A meta-analysis found that an increase in CFS was associated with an increase in mortality (each 1-point increase in CFS was associated with a 12% increase in mortality). [617] However, some studies suggest that a more nuanced understanding of frailty and outcomes is needed, and you should exercise caution in placing too much emphasis on the influence of frailty alone when discussing prognosis in older people. [618]  
- Implement local infection prevention and control procedures when managing patients with COVID-19.  
- Pregnant women should be managed by a multidisciplinary team, including obstetric, perinatal, neonatal, and intensive care specialists, as well as midwifery and mental health and psychosocial support. A woman-centred, respectful, skilled approach to care is recommended. [2] The multidisciplinary team should be organised as soon as possible after maternal hypoxemia occurs in order to assess fetal maturity, disease progression, and the best options for delivery. [684]  
- Discontinue transmission-based precautions (including isolation) and release patients from the care pathway 10 days after symptom onset plus at least 3 days without fever and respiratory symptoms. [2] The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends discontinuing isolation once at least 10 days and up to 20 days have passed since symptoms first appeared, and at least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of antipyretics, and symptoms have improved, if a symptom-based strategy is used. Consider consultation with infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Severely immunocompromised patients may produce replication-competent virus beyond 20 days and require additional testing and consultation with infectious diseases specialists and infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Alternatively, the CDC recommends at least two negative reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) tests on respiratory specimens collected 24 hours apart before ending isolation if a test-based strategy is used. A symptom-based strategy is preferred; however,

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### Acute

A test-based strategy can be considered in severely immunocompromised patients.[615] Guidance on when to stop isolation depends on local recommendations and may differ between countries. For example, in the UK the isolation period is 14 days from a positive test in hospitalised patients. Immunocompetent patients who tested positive on RT-PCR and have completed their 14-day isolation period are exempt from testing prior to hospital discharge if they are within 90 days from their initial illness onset or test, unless they develop new symptoms.[605]

**plus consider oxygen therapy**

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

- **Start supplemental oxygen therapy** immediately in any patient with emergency signs (i.e., obstructed or absent breathing, severe respiratory distress, central cyanosis, shock, coma and/or convulsions), or any patient without emergency signs and $\text{SpO}_2 < 90\%$.[2] [3]

- **Target $\text{SpO}_2$ to $\geq 94\%$ during resuscitation in adults and children with emergency signs who require emergency airway management and oxygen therapy.** Once the patient is stable, a target $\text{SpO}_2 > 90\%$ in children and non-pregnant adults, and $\geq 92\%$ to $95\%$ in pregnant women, is recommended. Nasal prongs or a nasal cannula are preferred in young children.[2] Some guidelines recommend that $\text{SpO}_2$ should be maintained no higher than $96\%$.[620]

- **Some centres may recommend different $\text{SpO}_2$ targets in order to support prioritisation of oxygen flow for the most severely ill patients in hospital.** NHS England recommends a target of $92\%$ to $96\%$ (or $90\%$ to $94\%$ if clinically appropriate), for example.[621]

- **Consider positioning techniques (e.g., high supported sitting), and airway clearance management to optimise oxygenation and assist with secretion clearance in adults.** Consider awake prone positioning (for 8-12 hours/day, broken into shorter periods over the day) in severely ill patients who require supplemental oxygen.[2] [3] Early self-proning of awake, non-intubated patients has been shown to improve oxygen saturation and may delay or reduce the need for intensive care.[622] [623] [624] [625] [626]
Acute

- Monitor patients closely for signs of progressive acute hypoxaemic respiratory failure.[2] [3]

**plus** symptom management and supportive care

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

- **Fluids and electrolytes:** use cautious fluid management in adults and children without tissue hypoperfusion and fluid responsiveness as aggressive fluid resuscitation may worsen oxygenation.[2] Correct any electrolyte or metabolic abnormalities, such as hyperglycaemia or metabolic acidosis, according to local protocols.[627]

- **Cough:** advise patients to avoid lying on their back as this makes coughing ineffective. Use simple measures (e.g., a teaspoon of honey in patients aged 1 year and older) to help cough. Short-term use of a cough suppressant may be considered in select patients (e.g., if the cough is distressing to the patient) provided there are no contraindications.[594] A meta-analysis found that honey is superior to usual care (e.g., antitussives) for the improvement of upper respiratory tract infection symptoms, particularly cough frequency and severity.[613]

- **Breathlessness:** keep the room cool, and encourage relaxation, breathing techniques, and changing body positions. Identify and treat any reversible causes of breathlessness (e.g., pulmonary oedema). Consider a trial of oxygen, if available. Consider an opioid and benzodiazepine combination in patients with moderate to severe breathlessness or patients who are distressed.[594]

- **Anxiety, delirium, and agitation:** identify and treat any underlying or reversible causes (e.g., offer reassurance, treat hypoxia, correct metabolic or endocrine abnormalities, address co-infections, minimise use of drugs that may cause or worsen delirium, treat substance withdrawal, maintain normal sleep cycles, treat pain or breathlessness).[2] [594] Consider a benzodiazepine for the management of anxiety or agitation that does not respond to other measures. Consider haloperidol or a phenothiazine for the management of delirium.[594] Low doses of haloperidol (or another suitable antipsychotic) can also be considered for agitation.[2] Non-pharmacological interventions are the mainstay...
### Acute

for the management of delirium when possible, and prevention is key.\[628\]

- **Mouth care:** an important part of overall patient care in hospitalised patients who are ventilated or non-ventilated and those undergoing step-down or end-of-life care.\[629\]

- **Mental health symptoms:** provide basic mental health and psychosocial support for all patients, and manage any symptoms of insomnia or depression as appropriate.\[2\]

**plus** venous thromboembolism prophylaxis

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

**Primary options**

- **enoxaparin:** consult specialist for guidance on dose

**OR**

- **dalteparin:** consult specialist for guidance on dose

**Secondary options**

- **fondaparinux:** consult specialist for guidance on dose

**OR**

- **heparin:** consult specialist for guidance on dose

- Assess the risk of bleeding as soon as possible after admission, or by the time of the first consultant review, using a suitable risk assessment tool.\[630\]

- Start venous thromboembolism (VTE) prophylaxis in acutely ill hospitalised adults and adolescents with COVID-19 as per the standard of care for other hospitalised patients without COVID-19, provided there are no contraindications. A COVID-19 diagnosis should not influence a paediatrician’s recommendations about VTE prophylaxis in hospitalised children. Pregnant women should be managed by a specialist.\[2\] \[3\] \[631\] \[632\] Start as soon as possible and within 14 hours of admission, and continue for the duration of the hospital stay or 7 days, whichever is longer.\[630\]

- Low molecular weight heparin, unfractionated heparin, or fondaparinux are the recommended
The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK recommends low molecular weight heparin first-line, with fondaparinux or unfractionated heparin reserved for patients who cannot have low molecular weight heparin. Unfractionated heparin is contraindicated in patients with severe thrombocytopenia. Fondaparinux is recommended in patients with a history of heparin-induced thrombocytopenia. Direct oral anticoagulants are not recommended. Mechanical thromboprophylaxis (e.g., intermittent pneumatic compression devices) is recommended if anticoagulation is contraindicated or not available.

» The optimal dose is unknown. Standard prophylaxis doses are recommended over intermediate- or full treatment-dose regimens in patients without an established indication for higher-dose anticoagulation. Some clinicians are using intermediate- or full treatment-dose regimens rather than prophylactic doses as they are worried about undetected thrombi; however, this may lead to major bleeding events. There are insufficient data to recommend increased anticoagulant doses for VTE prophylaxis in COVID-19 patients outside the setting of a clinical trial. However, some guidelines recommend that escalated doses can be considered in critically ill patients. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK only recommends considering intermediate doses in patients who are having advanced respiratory support, and the decision should be based on multidisciplinary or senior opinion, or locally agreed protocols. Reassess VTE and bleeding risks daily in these patients. NHS England recommends that therapeutic doses should not be offered unless there is a standard indication for therapeutic anticoagulation, as trials show that therapeutic doses do not improve clinical outcome of severe disease in the critical care setting. Dose adjustments may be required in patients with extremes of body weight or renal impairment.

» For patients who are already on an anticoagulant for another condition, continue the patient’s current therapeutic dose unless contraindicated by a change in clinical circumstances. Consider switching to low molecular weight heparin as the preferred option for venous thromboembolism prophylaxis if the patient’s clinical condition is deteriorating and...
**Acute**

- the patient is not currently on low molecular weight heparin.[630]

  » Monitor patients for signs and symptoms suggestive of thromboembolism and proceed with appropriate diagnostic and management pathways if clinically suspected.[2] If the patient’s clinical condition changes, assess the risk of VTE, reassess the bleeding risk, and review VTE prophylaxis.[630]

  » Continue until hospital discharge.[2] Routine post-discharge VTE prophylaxis is not generally recommended, except in certain high-risk patients.[3] [631] [632] Ensure patients who require VTE prophylaxis after discharge are able to use it correctly or have arrangements made for someone to help them.[630]

  » There is currently insufficient evidence to determine the risks and benefits of prophylactic anticoagulation in hospitalised patients with COVID-19.[637] A retrospective analysis of over 4000 patients found that anticoagulation was associated with lower mortality and intubation among hospitalised COVID-19 patients. Therapeutic anticoagulation was associated with lower mortality compared with prophylactic anticoagulation, but the difference was not statistically significant.[638] An observational cohort study of over 4000 patients found that early initiation of prophylactic anticoagulation in hospitalised patients was associated with a decreased risk of 30-day mortality and no increased risk of serious bleeding events compared with no anticoagulation.[639] Clinicians should rely on pre-COVID-19 evidence-based principles of anticoagulation management combined with rational approaches to address clinical challenges.[631]

  plus monitoring

- Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

  » Monitor patients closely for signs of clinical deterioration, and respond immediately with appropriate supportive care interventions.[2]

consider antibiotics

- Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group

  » Consider empirical antibiotics if there is clinical suspicion of bacterial infection. Give within 1 hour of initial assessment for patients with suspected sepsis or if the patient meets high-risk criteria (or within 4 hours of establishing
### Acute

A diagnosis of pneumonia; do not wait for microbiology results. Base the regimen on the clinical diagnosis (e.g., community-acquired pneumonia, hospital-acquired pneumonia, sepsis), local epidemiology and susceptibility data, and local treatment guidelines.[2] [3] [561]

» Some guidelines recommend empirical antibiotics for bacterial pathogens in all patients with community-acquired pneumonia without confirmed COVID-19. It is likely that the bacterial pathogens in patients with COVID-19 and pneumonia are the same as in previous patients with community-acquired pneumonia, and therefore empirical antimicrobial recommendations should be the same.[562]

However, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK recommends that it is reasonable not to start empirical antimicrobials if you are confident that the clinical features are typical for COVID-19.[561] There is insufficient evidence to recommend empirical broad-spectrum antimicrobials in the absence of another indication.[3]

» Some patients may require continued antibiotic therapy once COVID-19 has been confirmed depending on the clinical circumstances (e.g., clinical or microbiological evidence of bacterial infection regardless of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 [SARS-CoV-2] test results, SARS-CoV-2 test result is positive but clinical features are not typical for COVID-19).

In these circumstances, review antibiotic choice based on microbiology results and switch to a narrower-spectrum antibiotic if appropriate, review intravenous antibiotic use within 48 hours and consider switching to oral therapy, and give for a total of 5 days unless there is a clear indication to continue.[561]

» Reassess antibiotic use daily. De-escalate empirical therapy on the basis of microbiology results and clinical judgement. Regularly review the possibility of switching from intravenous to oral therapy. Duration of treatment should be as short as possible (e.g., 5 to 7 days). Antibiotic stewardship programmes should be in place.[2]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>consider</th>
<th>corticosteroid</th>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group</td>
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<tr>
<th>Primary options</th>
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<tr>
<td>» dexamethasone: adults: 6 mg orally/intravenously once daily for 7-10 days</td>
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### Acute

**OR**

- **hydrocortisone**: adults: 50 mg orally/intravenously every 8 hours for 7-10 days

### Secondary options

**OR**

- **prednisolone**: adults: 40 mg/day orally given in 1-2 divided doses for 7-10 days

- **methylprednisolone**: adults: 32 mg/day orally/intravenously given in 1-2 divided doses for 7-10 days

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**Corticosteroids**

**Recommendation 1**

- **Patients with severe and critical COVID-19**
  - **Usual supportive care**: Strong
  - **Corticosteroids**: Weak

**Recommendation 2**

- **Patients with mild to moderate COVID-19**
  - **Usual supportive care**: Strong
  - **Corticosteroids**: Weak

**Recommendations and evidence for the use of corticosteroids in hospitalised patients with COVID-19**

- The World Health Organization (WHO) strongly recommends systemic corticosteroid therapy (low-dose intravenous or oral dexamethasone or hydrocortisone) for 7 to 10 days in adults with severe COVID-19. This recommendation is based on two meta-analyses that pooled...
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<td>data from eight randomised trials (over 7000 patients), including the UK RECOVERY trial. Moderate-quality evidence suggests that systemic corticosteroids probably reduce 28-day mortality in patients with severe and critical COVID-19. They also probably reduce the need for invasive ventilation. There is no evidence directly comparing dexamethasone and hydrocortisone. The harms of treatment in this context are considered to be minor. It is unclear whether these recommendations can be applied to children or those who are immunocompromised.[595] [641] [642] There is also evidence that corticosteroids probably reduce the length of intensive care unit stay (low certainty), and increase ventilator-free days (moderate certainty).[643] [644]</td>
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» [BMJ rapid recommendations: a living WHO guideline on drugs for COVID-19]

» In the UK, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends dexamethasone or hydrocortisone in patients with severe COVID-19 (in line with WHO guidance). The marketing authorisations cover this indication in the UK.[593]

» [NICE: COVID-19 prescribing brief – corticosteroids]

» In Europe, the European Medicines Agency has endorsed the use of dexamethasone for patients with severe disease who require oxygen therapy or mechanical ventilation.[645]

» In the US, the National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends dexamethasone, either alone or in combination with remdesivir (see the [Emerging] section for information on remdesivir), in hospitalized patients who require supplemental oxygen. The panel recommends against using dexamethasone in patients who do not require supplemental oxygen. Alternative corticosteroids may be used in situations where dexamethasone is not available.[3] The Infectious Diseases Society of America supports the use of dexamethasone in hospitalised patients with severe disease.[646]

» Monitor patients for adverse effects (e.g., hyperglycaemia, secondary infections, psychiatric effects, reactivation of latent infections) and assess for drug-drug interactions.[3] Follow local policies on gastroprotection during corticosteroid treatment. Clinically significant interactions between remdesivir and corticosteroids are unlikely;
Acute

however, lopinavir/ritonavir may increase hydrocortisone concentrations.[593]

» Treatment should stop if the person is discharged from hospital before the 10-day course is completed.[593]

consider treatment of co-infections

Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group

» Treat laboratory-confirmed co-infections (e.g., malaria, tuberculosis, influenza) as appropriate according to local protocols.[2] The treatment of influenza is the same in all patients regardless of SARS-CoV-2 co-infection. Start empirical treatment with oseltamivir in hospitalised patients who are suspected of having either or both infections as soon as possible without waiting for influenza test results. Antiviral therapy can be stopped once influenza has been ruled out.[3]

consider antipyretic/analgesic

Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group

Primary options

» paracetamol: children: consult local drug formulary for guidance on dose; adults: 500-1000 mg orally every 4-6 hours when required, maximum 4000 mg/day

OR

» ibuprofen: children: consult local drug formulary for guidance on dose; adults: 300-600 mg orally (immediate-release) every 6-8 hours when required, maximum 2400 mg/day

» Paracetamol or ibuprofen are recommended.[2][620] There is no evidence at present of severe adverse events in COVID-19 patients taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, or of effects as a result of the use of NSAIDs on acute healthcare utilisation, long-term survival, or quality of life in patients with COVID-19.[606][607][608][609][610][611][612]

» Ibuprofen should only be taken at the lowest effective dose for the shortest period needed to control symptoms. It is not recommended in pregnant women (especially in the third trimester) or children <6 months of age (age cut-offs vary by country).
### Acute

<table>
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<tr>
<th>consider</th>
<th>experimental therapies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group</td>
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<tr>
<td>» Consider appropriate experimental or emerging therapies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>» Antiviral therapies will have a greater effect early in the course of the disease, whereas immunosuppressive/anti-inflammatory therapies are likely to have a greater effect later in the course of the disease.[3]</td>
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<tr>
<td>» See the [Emerging] section for more information.</td>
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<tr>
<th>consider</th>
<th>plan for discharge and rehabilitation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group</td>
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<tr>
<td>» Routinely assess older patients for mobility, functional swallow, cognitive impairment, and mental health concerns, and based on that assessment determine whether the patient is ready for discharge, and whether the patient has any rehabilitation and follow-up requirements.[2]</td>
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<th>consider</th>
<th>palliative care</th>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group</td>
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<tr>
<td>» Palliative care interventions should be made accessible at each institution that provides care for patients with COVID-19. Identify whether the patient has an advance care plan and respect the patient’s priorities and preferences when formulating the patient’s care plan.[2] Follow local palliative care guidelines.</td>
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### critical COVID-19

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>intensive/critical care unit admission</th>
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<tr>
<td>» Patients with critical disease (i.e., presence of acute respiratory distress syndrome, sepsis, or septic shock) should be admitted or transferred to an intensive/critical care unit under the guidance of a specialist team.[2]</td>
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<tr>
<td>» Discuss the risks, benefits, and potential outcomes of treatment options with patients and their families, and allow them to express preferences about their management. Take their wishes and expectations into account when considering the ceiling of treatment. Use decision support tools if available. Put treatment escalation plans in place, and discuss any existing advance care plans or advance</td>
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<td>decisions to refuse treatment with patients who have pre-existing advanced comorbidities.[594]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Implement local infection prevention and control procedures when managing patients with COVID-19.</td>
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<tr>
<td>» Pregnant women should be managed by a multidisciplinary team, including obstetric, perinatal, neonatal, and intensive care specialists, as well as midwifery and mental health and psychosocial support. A woman-centred, respectful, skilled approach to care is recommended.[2] The multidisciplinary team should be organised as soon as possible after maternal hypoxemia occurs in order to assess fetal maturity, disease progression, and the best options for delivery.[684]</td>
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<tr>
<td>» Discontinue transmission-based precautions (including isolation) and release patients from the care pathway 10 days after symptom onset plus at least 3 days without fever and respiratory symptoms.[2] The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends discontinuing isolation once at least 10 days and up to 20 days have passed since symptoms first appeared, and at least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of antipyretics, and symptoms have improved, if a symptom-based strategy is used. Consider consultation with infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Severely immunocompromised patients may produce replication-competent virus beyond 20 days and require additional testing and consultation with infectious diseases specialists and infection control experts before discontinuing isolation. Alternatively, the CDC recommends at least two negative reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) tests on respiratory specimens collected 24 hours apart before ending isolation if a test-based strategy is used. A symptom-based strategy is preferred; however, a test-based strategy can be considered in severely immunocompromised patients.[615] Guidance on when to stop isolation depends on local recommendations and may differ between countries. For example, in the UK the isolation period is 14 days from a positive test in hospitalised patients. Immunocompetent patients who tested positive on RT-PCR and have completed their 14-day isolation period are exempt from testing prior to hospital discharge if they are within 90 days from their initial illness onset or test, unless they develop new symptoms.[605]</td>
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Acute

**Management**

**plus symptom management and supportive care**

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

- Consider fluid and electrolyte management, antimicrobial treatment, venous thromboembolism prophylaxis, and symptom management as appropriate. See Severe COVID-19 above for more detailed information.

- Unfractionated heparin is preferred over fondaparinux in critically ill patients if low molecular weight heparin as the preferred option for venous thromboembolism prophylaxis cannot be used. Some guidelines recommend that escalated doses can be considered in critically ill patients. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK recommends considering intermediate doses in patients who are having advanced respiratory support, and the decision should be based on multidisciplinary or senior opinion, or locally agreed protocols. Reassess venous thromboembolism and bleeding risks daily in these patients. NHS England recommends that therapeutic doses should not be offered unless there is a standard indication for therapeutic anticoagulation, as trials show that therapeutic doses do not improve clinical outcome of severe disease in the critical care setting. Dose adjustments may be required in patients with extremes of body weight or renal impairment.

- Follow local guidelines for the management of pain, sedation, and delirium.

- Implement standard interventions to prevent complications associated with critical illness.

**plus consider high-flow nasal oxygen or non-invasive ventilation**

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

- Consider a trial of high-flow nasal oxygen (HFNO) or non-invasive ventilation (e.g., continuous positive airway pressure [CPAP] or bilevel positive airway pressure [BiPAP]) in selected patients with mild acute respiratory distress syndrome. Consider awake prone positioning (for 8-12 hours/day, broken into shorter periods over the day) in severely ill patients who require HFNO or non-invasive ventilation.
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- Airborne precautions are recommended for these interventions (including bubble CPAP) due to uncertainty about the potential for aerosolisation.[2]

- Patients with hypercapnia, haemodynamic instability, multi-organ failure, or abnormal mental status should generally not receive HFNO, although emerging data suggest that it may be safe in patients with mild to moderate and non-worsening hypercapnia. Patients with hypoxaemic respiratory failure and haemodynamic instability, multi-organ failure, or abnormal mental status should not receive these treatments in place of other options such as invasive ventilation.[2]

- There is ongoing debate about the optimal mode of respiratory support before mechanical ventilation.[652] NHS England recommends CPAP as the preferred form of non-invasive ventilation in patients with hypoxaemic (type 1) respiratory failure. It doesn’t advocate the use of HFNO based on a lack of efficacy, oxygen use (HFNO can place a strain on oxygen supplies with the risk of site supply failure), and infection spread.[653] Other guidelines recommend HFNO over non-invasive ventilation, unless HFNO is not available.[3] [620] Despite the trend to avoid HFNO, it has been shown to have a similar risk of aerosol generation to standard oxygen masks.[654]

- Early CPAP may provide a bridge to invasive mechanical ventilation. Reserve the use of BiPAP for patients with hypercapnic acute on chronic ventilatory failure (type 2 respiratory failure).[653]

- Monitor patients closely for acute deterioration. If patients do not improve after a short trial of these interventions, they require urgent endotracheal intubation.[2] [620]

### plus consider invasive mechanical ventilation

Treatment recommended for ALL patients in selected patient group

- Consider endotracheal intubation and mechanical ventilation in patients who are acutely deteriorating despite advanced oxygen/non-invasive ventilatory support measures.[2] [3]

- Endotracheal intubation should be performed by an experienced provider using airborne precautions.[2] Intubation by video laryngoscopy is recommended if possible.[3] Young children, or adults who are obese or pregnant, may...
Acute desaturate quickly during intubation and therefore require pre-oxygenation with 100% fraction of inspired oxygen (FiO₂) for 5 minutes.[2]

» Mechanically ventilated patients with acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) should receive a lung-protective, low tidal volume/low inspiratory pressure ventilation strategy (lower targets are recommended in children). A higher positive end-expiratory pressure (PEEP) strategy is preferred over a lower PEEP strategy in moderate to severe ARDS. However, individualisation of PEEP, where the patient is monitored for beneficial or harmful effects and driving pressure during titration with consideration of the risks and benefits of PEEP titration, is recommended.[2] [3] [620] NHS England recommends a low PEEP strategy in patients with normal compliance where recruitment may not be required.[662]

» Although some patients with COVID-19 pneumonia meet the criteria for ARDS, there is some discussion about whether COVID-19 pneumonia is its own specific disease with atypical phenotypes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the main characteristic of the atypical presentation is the dissociation between well-preserved lung mechanics and the severity of hypoxaemia.[663] [664] [665] [666] [667] [668] However, this approach has been criticised.[669] [670] It has been argued that an evidence-based approach extrapolating data from ARDS not related to COVID-19 is the most reasonable approach for intensive care of COVID-19 patients.[671] As a consequence of this, some clinicians have warned that protocol-driven ventilator use may be causing lung injury in some patients, and that ventilator settings should be based on physiological findings rather than using standard protocols. High PEEP may have a detrimental effect on patients with normal compliance.[663] PEEP should always be carefully titrated.[672]

» Consider prone ventilation in patients with severe ARDS for 12 to 16 hours per day. Pregnant women in the third trimester may benefit from being placed in the lateral decubitus position. Caution is required in children.[2] [3] [620] Longer durations may be feasible in some patients.[673]

» Lung recruitment manoeuvres are suggested, but staircase recruitment manoeuvres are not recommended.[3] [620]
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consider</th>
<th>Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>inhaled pulmonary vasodilator</strong></td>
<td>Consider a trial of an inhaled pulmonary vasodilator in adults who have severe acute respiratory distress syndrome and hypoxaemia despite optimising ventilation. Taper off if there is no rapid improvement in oxygenation.[3] [620]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>extracorporeal membrane oxygenation</strong></td>
<td>Consider extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) according to availability and expertise if the above methods fail.[2] [620] [677] [678] ECMO is not suitable for all patients, and only those who meet certain inclusion criteria may be considered for ECMO.[679] There is insufficient evidence to recommend either for or against the routine use of ECMO.[3] The estimated 60-day survival rate of ECMO-rescued patients with COVID-19 (31%) was similar to that of previous studies of ECMO for severe ARDS.[680] An international cohort study of 1035 patients found that both the estimated mortality 90 days after ECMO initiation and mortality in those who achieved a final outcome of death or discharge were &lt;40%, consistent with previously reported survival rates in acute hypoxaemic respiratory failure.[681] Single-access, dual-stage venovenous ECMO with early extubation appears to be safe and effective in patients with COVID-19 respiratory failure.[682]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>management of sepsis/septic shock</strong></td>
<td>The management of sepsis and septic shock in patients with COVID-19 is beyond the scope of this topic. See the [Complications] section.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>corticosteroid</strong></td>
<td>Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group Primary options dexamethasone: adults: 6 mg orally/intravenously once daily for 7-10 days</td>
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</table>
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Management

**Acute**

OR

- **hydrocortisone**: adults: 50 mg orally/intravenously every 8 hours for 7-10 days. May be continued for up to 28 days for patients with septic shock. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. COVID-19 rapid guideline: critical care in adults. 2021 [internet publication]. https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng159

**Secondary options**

- **prednisolone**: adults: 40 mg/day orally given in 1-2 divided doses for 7-10 days

OR

- **methylprednisolone**: adults: 32 mg/day orally/intravenously given in 1-2 divided doses for 7-10 days

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**Recommendations and evidence for the use of corticosteroids in hospitalised patients with COVID-19**

*BMJ. 2020;370:m3379*
» The World Health Organization (WHO) strongly recommends systemic corticosteroid therapy (low-dose intravenous or oral dexamethasone or hydrocortisone) for 7 to 10 days in adults with critical COVID-19. This recommendation is based on two meta-analyses that pooled data from eight randomised trials (over 7000 patients), including the UK RECOVERY trial. Moderate-quality evidence suggests that systemic corticosteroids probably reduce 28-day mortality in patients with severe and critical COVID-19. They also probably reduce the need for invasive ventilation. There is no evidence directly comparing dexamethasone and hydrocortisone. The harms of treatment in this context are considered to be minor. It is unclear whether these recommendations can be applied to children or those who are immunocompromised.[595] [641] [642] There is also evidence that corticosteroids probably reduce the length of intensive care unit stay (low certainty), and increase ventilator-free days (moderate certainty).[643] [644]

» [BMJ rapid recommendations: a living WHO guideline on drugs for COVID-19]

» In the UK, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends dexamethasone or hydrocortisone in patients with critical COVID-19 (in line with WHO guidance). The marketing authorisations cover this indication in the UK.[593]

» [NICE: COVID-19 prescribing brief – corticosteroids]

» In Europe, the European Medicines Agency has endorsed the use of dexamethasone for patients with severe disease who require oxygen therapy or mechanical ventilation.[645]

» In the US, the National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends using dexamethasone, either alone or in combination with remdesivir (see the [Emerging] section for information on remdesivir), in hospitalised patients who require high-flow oxygen or non-invasive ventilation. The panel recommends dexamethasone alone in patients on mechanical ventilation or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation. Alternative corticosteroids may be used in situations where dexamethasone is not available.[3] The Infectious Diseases Society of America supports the use of dexamethasone in hospitalised patients with severe disease.[646]
### Acute

» Monitor patients for adverse effects (e.g., hyperglycaemia, secondary infections, psychiatric effects, reactivation of latent infections) and assess for drug-drug interactions.[3] Follow local policies on gastroprotection during corticosteroid treatment. Clinically significant interactions between remdesivir and corticosteroids are unlikely; however, lopinavir/ritonavir may increase hydrocortisone concentrations.[593]

» Treatment should stop if the person is discharged from hospital before the 10-day course is completed.[593]

» A meta-analysis found an increased risk of venous thromboembolism with corticosteroid administration in patients with critical disease. However, no definite findings were available due to the differing corticosteroid regimens and the heterogeneity of the studies.[683]

#### consider treatment of co-infections

Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group

» Treat laboratory-confirmed co-infections (e.g., malaria, tuberculosis, influenza) as appropriate according to local protocols.[2] The treatment of influenza is the same in all patients regardless of SARS-CoV-2 co-infection. Start empirical treatment with oseltamivir in hospitalised patients who are suspected of having either or both infections as soon as possible without waiting for influenza test results. Antiviral therapy can be stopped once influenza has been ruled out.[3]

#### consider experimental therapies

Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group

» Consider appropriate experimental or emerging therapies.

» Antiviral therapies will have a greater effect early in the course of the disease, whereas immunosuppressive/anti-inflammatory therapies are likely to have a greater effect later in the course of the disease.[3]

» See the [Emerging] section for more information.

#### consider plan for discharge and rehabilitation

Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Management

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» Routinely assess intensive care patients for mobility, functional swallow, cognitive impairment, and mental health concerns, and based on that assessment determine whether the patient is ready for discharge, and whether the patient has any rehabilitation and follow-up requirements.[2]

consider palliative care

Treatment recommended for SOME patients in selected patient group

» Palliative care interventions should be made accessible at each institution that provides care for patients with COVID-19. Identify whether the patient has an advance care plan and respect the patient’s priorities and preferences when formulating the patient’s care plan.[2] Follow local palliative care guidelines.
Emerging

Remdesivir

Remdesivir is an investigational broad-spectrum antiviral agent that inhibits RNA-dependent RNA polymerase. It is approved in many countries for the treatment of COVID-19.

- In the UK and Europe, remdesivir has been conditionally approved in adolescents (≥12 years of age who weigh at least 40 kg) and adults with pneumonia who require supplemental oxygen (low- or high-flow oxygen or other non-invasive ventilation at start of treatment).[808]
- In the US, remdesivir has been approved for the treatment of adolescents (≥12 years of age who weigh at least 40 kg) and adults who require hospitalisation, and has emergency-use authorisation for use in children.[809]

The World Health Organization recommends against the use of remdesivir in hospitalised patients in addition to standard care, regardless of disease severity.[595] [642]

- This weak or conditional recommendation is based on a systematic review and network meta-analysis of four randomised trials with 7333 hospitalised patients, and included the NIAID-ACTT-1 trial (on which the original US approval of remdesivir was based) and the WHO Solidarity trial. There is currently no evidence that remdesivir improves patient outcomes such as time to clinical improvement, the need for mechanical ventilation, or mortality. However, the meta-analysis did not prove that remdesivir has no benefit.[642] The WHO Solidarity trial found that remdesivir appears to have little or no effect on hospitalised patients, as indicated by overall mortality, initiation of ventilation, and duration of hospital stay.[810]
- Another living systematic review and network meta-analysis found that remdesivir may not reduce mortality (low-certainty evidence) or time to symptom resolution (moderate-certainty evidence) compared with standard of care.[643] [644]
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)  
Management

Recommendations and evidence for the use of remdesivir in hospitalised patients with COVID-19

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The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends remdesivir in hospitalised patients who require supplemental oxygen. [3]

* It may be given alone (e.g., for patients who require minimal supplemental oxygen) or in combination with dexamethasone (e.g., for patients who require increasing amounts of supplemental oxygen).
• The panel also recommends remdesivir, in combination with dexamethasone, in hospitalised patients who require high-flow oxygen or non-invasive ventilation. It does not recommend remdesivir in patients who require invasive mechanical ventilation or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO).

• The panel acknowledges that remdesivir may also be appropriate in hospitalised patients who do not require oxygen, but who are at high risk of disease progression.

• The recommended treatment course is 5 days or until hospital discharge, whichever comes first. Some experts recommend a 10-day course in patients who have not shown substantial clinical improvement by day 5.

The Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends remdesivir in hospitalised patients with severe disease. [646]

• This recommendation is based on moderate-certainty evidence. The recommended treatment course is 5 days in patients on oxygen, and 10 days in patients on mechanical ventilation or ECMO.

• The panel recommends against the routine use of remdesivir in hospitalised patients who do not require oxygen and have an oxygen saturation >94% on room air, based on very low-certainty evidence.

There are conflicting recommendations across international guidelines about the use of remdesivir, so it is important that you check local guidance and protocols.

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing this drug.

Interleukin-6 (IL-6) inhibitors

IL-6 inhibitors inhibit IL-6-mediated signalling by competitively binding to IL-6 receptors. IL-6 is a proinflammatory cytokine. These drugs (e.g., tocilizumab, siltuximab) are being trialed in patients for the treatment of SARS-CoV-2-induced cytokine release syndrome. They are already approved in some countries for certain conditions, but are off-label for this indication.

UK guidance recommends considering tocilizumab (or sarilumab as an alternative) in critically ill adults admitted to the intensive care unit with severe pneumonia requiring respiratory support when infection is confirmed by microbiological testing (or where a multidisciplinary team has a high level of confidence that the clinical and radiological features suggest that COVID-19 is the most likely diagnosis) and patients do not meet specific exclusion criteria.[593] [811]

• This recommendation is based on evidence (yet to be peer reviewed) from the REMAP-CAP trial that showed a reduction in mortality of 24% when these drugs were given within 24 hours of intensive care unit admission, compared with standard of care (including corticosteroids). The treatment also reduced the time patients spent in the intensive care unit by more than 1 week on average. The effect is thought to be supplementary to those from corticosteroids.[812]

• According to the UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, it is possible that any benefit from tocilizumab or sarilumab is seen only in the most severely ill patients when given soon after organ support is started, when any developing organ dysfunction may be more reversible.[813] [814]

• Preliminary data from the UK RECOVERY trial (yet to be peer reviewed) found that tocilizumab reduced 28-day mortality compared with usual care in patients who required oxygen and had evidence of inflammation. The results showed that 29% of patients in the tocilizumab group died within 28 days compared with 33% in the usual care group, a 14% reduction in relative mortality. Tocilizumab also increased the probability of discharge alive within 28 days from 47% to 54%. These benefits were seen regardless of the level of respiratory support, and were additional to the benefits of corticosteroids.[815] According to a UK government press release, updated guidance will be sent to NHS trusts and clinicians, recommending they use this drug for hospitalised patients who may benefit from the treatment.[816]
The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel states that there are insufficient data to recommend either for or against the use of tocilizumab or sarilumab in patients who are within 24 hours of admission to the intensive care unit and who require invasive or non-invasive mechanical ventilation or high-flow oxygen.[3]

- However, some panel members recommend a single dose of tocilizumab, in addition to dexamethasone, to patients who meet the above criteria and who are also exhibiting rapid progression of respiratory failure, based on results from the REMAP-CAP trial.
- The panel recommends against the use of tocilizumab or sarilumab in patients who do not require admission to the intensive care unit, or who are admitted to the intensive care unit but do not meet the above criteria.

The Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends against the routine use of tocilizumab in hospitalised patients based on low-certainty evidence.[646]

There are conflicting recommendations across international guidelines about the use of these agents, so it is important that you check local guidance and protocols.

**Evidence is emerging.**

- A living systematic review and meta-analysis found that (as of 8 October 2020) there is moderate-certainty evidence that tocilizumab reduces the risk of mechanical ventilation in hospitalised patients. Low-certainty evidence from cohort studies suggests an association between tocilizumab and lower mortality.[817]
- Another systematic review and meta-analysis found that IL-6 inhibitors plus standard of care significantly decreased mortality compared with standard of care alone, without increasing the risk of secondary infections. However, no benefit was observed in patients with critical disease. IL-6 inhibitors did not show a beneficial effect on reducing the rate of mechanical ventilation rate, decreasing intensive care unit admission, or increasing clinical improvement.[818]
- The most recent systematic review and meta-analysis (as of 7 January 2021) found that tocilizumab was associated with improved unadjusted survival (risk ratio 0.83), but conclusive benefit was not demonstrated for other outcomes.[819]
- The randomised controlled phase 3 EMPACTA trial found that tocilizumab reduced the need for mechanical ventilation in hospitalised patients compared with placebo, although there was no statistical difference in mortality between the two arms.[820] However, the randomised controlled phase 3 COVACTA trial failed to meet its primary end point of clinical status, and found that tocilizumab did not improve mortality.[821] Full results of both trials are yet to be published. Other randomised trials also give conflicting results.[822][823][824][825][826][827]
- A large retrospective study found that IL-6 inhibitors were not associated with a significant reduction in mortality in hospitalised patients compared with patients who did not receive interleukin inhibitors, except in a subgroup of patients with markedly high C-reactive protein levels.[828]

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing these drugs.

**Casirivimab/imdevimab**

Casirivimab/imdevimab is an intravenous investigational neutralising human immunoglobulin G-1 monoclonal antibody with activity against severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Casirivimab/imdevimab (formerly known as REGN-COV2) has been granted an emergency-use authorisation in the US for the treatment of mild to moderate disease in children and adults.[829] It has not been authorised for use in the UK or Europe; however, the European Medicines Agency is currently reviewing the data.

- The US emergency-use authorisation covers patients with positive results of direct viral testing who are 12 years of age and older weighing at least 40 kg, and who are at high risk for progressing to severe disease and/or hospitalisation. This includes patients who are 65 years of age or older, or who have certain chronic medical conditions.
The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel states that there are insufficient data to recommend either for or against the use of casirivimab/imdevimab for the treatment of outpatients with mild to moderate COVID-19, and that it should not be considered the standard of care.[3]

- Patients at higher risk for disease progression should be prioritised for treatment, and patients who are hospitalised should not receive casirivimab/imdevimab outside of a clinical trial.

The Infectious Diseases Society of America suggests against the routine use of casirivimab/imdevimab in ambulatory patients. [646]

- However, it recommends that casirivimab/imdevimab may be a reasonable treatment option in ambulatory patients or patients with mild to moderate disease who are admitted to the hospital for the management of conditions other than COVID-19 and who are at increased risk of progressing to severe disease, after informed decision-making.

Evidence is emerging.

- Emergency-use authorisation was based on a randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial in non-hospitalised adults with mild to moderate symptoms that found that casirivimab/imdevimab reduced hospitalisation or accident and emergency department visits in patients at high risk for disease progression within 28 days after treatment, when compared with placebo. This study is yet to be published.[829]
- An interim analysis of an ongoing, randomised, double-blind, phase 1-3 trial in non-hospitalised patients found that casirivimab/imdevimab reduced viral load from baseline through to day 7, with a greater effect in patients whose immune response had not yet been initiated or who had a high viral load at baseline.[830]
- Casirivimab/imdevimab is not authorised for use in hospitalised patients or those who require oxygen as it has not shown benefit in these patients. Further enrolment of patients requiring high-flow oxygen or mechanical ventilation has been placed on hold due to a potential safety signal and an unfavourable risk/benefit profile at this time. However, enrolment of hospitalised patients requiring either no or low-flow oxygen is being continued.[831]
- A preprint study found that casirivimab/imdevimab successfully neutralises the circulating B.1.1.7 and B.1.351 SARS-CoV-2 variants.[832]
- According to a press release from the manufacturer, interim results from an ongoing phase 3 trial evaluating casirivimab/imdevimab for prevention in people at high risk of infection due to household exposure found that passive vaccination with casirivimab/imdevimab resulted in prevention of symptomatic infection in 100% of patients compared with placebo (8 cases in the placebo group compared with 0 in the casirivimab/imdevimab group), and 50% lower overall rates of symptomatic or asymptomatic infection.[833] Results are yet to be published.

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing this drug.

**Bamlanivimab**

Bamlanivimab is an intravenous investigational neutralising human immunoglobulin G-1 monoclonal antibody with activity against SARS-CoV-2. Bamlanivimab (formerly known as LY-CoV555) has been granted an emergency-use authorisation in the US for the treatment of mild to moderate disease in children and adults.[834] It has also been granted emergency-use authorisation, in combination with etesevimab (another neutralising human immunoglobulin G-1 monoclonal antibody, formerly known as LY-CoV016), for the treatment of mild to moderate disease in children and adults.[835] Bamlanivimab has not been authorised for use in the UK or Europe; however, the European Medicines Agency is currently reviewing the data.

- The US emergency-use authorisations cover patients with positive results of direct viral testing who are 12 years of age and older weighing at least 40 kg, and who are at high risk for progressing to severe disease and/or hospitalisation. This includes patients who are 65 years of age or older, or who have certain chronic medical conditions.
The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel states that there are insufficient data to recommend either for or against the use of bamlanivimab for the treatment of outpatients with mild to moderate disease, and that it should not be considered the standard of care.\[3\]

- Patients at higher risk for disease progression should be prioritised for treatment, and patients who are hospitalised should not receive bamlanivimab outside of a clinical trial.

The Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends against the use of bamlanivimab in hospitalised patients with severe disease. It suggests against the routine use of bamlanivimab in ambulatory patients.\[646\]

- However, it recommends that bamlanivimab may be a reasonable treatment option in ambulatory patients or patients with mild to moderate disease who are admitted to the hospital for the management of conditions other than COVID-19 and who are at increased risk of progressing to severe disease after informed decision-making.

Evidence is emerging.

- A trial investigating the efficacy of bamlanivimab in hospitalised patients has been stopped based on trial data that suggest bamlanivimab is unlikely to help hospitalised patients recover from advanced disease. Other studies of bamlanivimab in recently diagnosed mild to moderate disease, recently diagnosed disease in the ambulatory setting, and prevention of disease in residents and staff at long-term care facilities remain ongoing.\[836\]
- Bamlanivimab, in combination with remdesivir, did not demonstrate efficacy among hospitalised patients who had COVID-19 without end-organ failure.\[837\]
- Among patients with mild to moderate disease, treatment with bamlanivimab plus etesevimab was associated with a significant reduction in viral load at day 11 compared with placebo; however, no significant difference in viral load reduction was observed with bamlanivimab monotherapy.\[838\]
- A preprint study found that bamlanivimab does not neutralise the circulating B.1.1.7 and B.1.351 SARS-CoV-2 variants.\[832\]
- According to a press release, bamlanivimab reduced the risk of infection by 80% in a nursing home in the BLAZE-2 trial; however, results are yet to be published.\[839\]

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing this drug.

Convalescent plasma

Convalescent plasma is a blood product that contains antibodies to SARS-CoV-2 from patients who have recovered. High-titre convalescent plasma (i.e., plasma with high SARS-CoV-2 antibody titres) has been granted an emergency-use authorisation in the US for the treatment of hospitalised patients early in the disease course, and to those hospitalised patients who have impaired humoral immunity and cannot produce an adequate antibody response. Low-titre convalescent plasma is no longer authorised.\[840\] It has not been authorised for this indication in the UK or Europe.

The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel states that there is currently insufficient evidence to recommend either for or against the use of convalescent plasma. \[3\]

- The Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends convalescent plasma only in the context of a clinical trial.\[646\]

Evidence is emerging.

- Emergency-use authorisation was based on the preprint (not peer reviewed) publication of an open-label, multicentre, expanded access programme study of over 35,000 patients that found convalescent plasma lowered 7-day mortality by 9% in hospitalised patients when given within 3 days of diagnosis, and by 12% when given 4 or more days later.\[841\]
• A meta-analysis and systematic review with a total of 5444 patients found that the use of convalescent plasma reduced mortality, increased viral clearance, and resulted in clinical improvement; however, the evidence is of low quality.[842]

• An open-label, randomised controlled trial in hospitalised patients with moderate disease found that convalescent plasma was not associated with a reduction in progression to severe disease or all-cause mortality.[843] However, a randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial in older patients with mild disease who received convalescent plasma within 72 hours after the onset of symptoms found that early administration reduced the progression to severe disease.[844]

• A Cochrane review found that currently available evidence on the safety and efficacy of convalescent plasma for the treatment of hospitalised patients is of low or very low certainty.[845]

• Recruitment to the convalescent plasma arm of the RECOVERY trial has now closed, as a preliminary analysis of the data found no convincing evidence that further recruitment would provide conclusive proof of worthwhile mortality benefit either overall or in any prespecified subgroup.[846]

Baricitinib

Baricitinib is an oral Janus kinase inhibitor. It is thought to prevent the dysregulated production of proinflammatory cytokines in patients with severe or critical disease. Baricitinib is already approved in some countries for certain conditions. It has been granted an emergency-use authorisation in the US, in combination with remdesivir, for the treatment of suspected or confirmed disease in hospitalised children aged 2 years and older and adults who require supplemental oxygen, invasive mechanical ventilation, or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation.[847] It has not been authorised for this indication in the UK or Europe.

The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel states that there are insufficient data to recommend either for or against the use of baricitinib,[846] in combination with remdesivir, for the treatment of hospitalised patients in cases where corticosteroids can be used instead.[3]

• In rare cases where corticosteroids cannot be used, the panel recommends baricitinib in combination with remdesivir for the treatment of hospitalised, non-intubated patients who require oxygen supplementation.

• The panel recommends against the use of baricitinib monotherapy, except in the context of a clinical trial. There are insufficient data to recommend either for or against the use of baricitinib in combination with corticosteroids.

The Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends baricitinib with remdesivir in hospitalised patients with severe disease who cannot receive corticosteroids because of a contraindication, rather than remdesivir alone.[646]

• The combination should only be given with a corticosteroid in the context of a clinical trial.

Evidence is emerging.

• Emergency-use authorisation was based on a randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial that found baricitinib plus remdesivir reduced time to recovery (defined as either being discharged from the hospital, or being hospitalised but not requiring supplemental oxygen and no longer requiring ongoing medical care) within 29 days after initiating treatment compared with patients who received placebo plus remdesivir. The median time to recovery was 7 days for baricitinib plus remdesivir and 8 days for placebo plus remdesivir.[848]

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing this drug.

Ivermectin

Ivermectin is a broad-spectrum antiparasitic agent. It has been shown to be effective against SARS-CoV-2 in vitro.[849] Ivermectin is already approved in some countries for parasitic infections, but is off-label for this indication.
The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel states that there is currently insufficient evidence to recommend either for or against the use of ivermectin. [3]

- The Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends against the use of ivermectin in outpatients and hospitalised patients outside of the context of a clinical trial, adding that more trials of sufficient design are needed.[646]

Evidence is limited.

- The results of several randomised trials and retrospective cohort studies have been published or made available as preliminary reports (not peer reviewed as yet). Some studies showed no benefits or worsening of disease after ivermectin use; others reported a shorter time to symptom resolution, shorter time to viral clearance, greater reduction in inflammatory markers, and lower mortality rates in patients who received ivermectin compared with patients who received a comparator drug or placebo. Results from adequately powered, well-designed, and well-conducted clinical trials are needed.[3]
- A systematic review and meta-analysis found that adding ivermectin to usual care led to significant clinical improvement and a significant reduction in all-cause mortality compared with usual care; however, the quality of evidence was very low.[850]

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing this drug.

**Anakinra**

Anakinra is an intravenous/subcutaneous interleukin-1 inhibitor. It is being trialled in patients for the treatment of SARS-CoV-2-induced cytokine release syndrome. Anakinra is already approved in some countries for certain indications, but is off-label for this indication.

The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel states that there is currently insufficient evidence to recommend either for or against the use of anakinra. [3]

The UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence states that there is no evidence available to determine whether anakinra is effective, safe, or cost-effective for treating adults and children with secondary haemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis triggered by SARS-CoV-2 or a similar coronavirus.[851]

Evidence is limited.

- A small retrospective study found that the addition of high-dose anakinra to non-invasive ventilation and standard care (including hydroxychloroquine and lopinavir/ritonavir) in patients with moderate to severe acute respiratory distress syndrome and hyperinflammation was associated with a higher survival rate at 21 days.[852]
- A large retrospective study found that anakinra was associated with a significant reduction in mortality in hospitalised patients compared with patients who did not receive interleukin inhibitors.[828]
- A small prospective cohort study found that anakinra significantly reduced the need for invasive mechanical ventilation and mortality in patients with severe disease.[853]
- A small retrospective case series found that anakinra could be beneficial in patients with cytokine release syndrome when initiated early after the onset of acute hypoxic respiratory failure.[854]
- A phase 3 trial comparing anakinra with optimised standard of care in hospitalised patients has been suspended due to excess mortality in the intervention arm.[855]
- An open-label randomised controlled trial found that anakinra did not improve outcomes in patients with mild to moderate disease.[856]

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing this drug.

**Intravenous immunoglobulin**
Intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIG) is a blood product prepared from serum pooled from healthy donors. It has an immunomodulatory effect that suppresses a hyperactive immune response. IVIG is already approved in some countries for certain conditions, but is off-label for this indication.

**The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends** against the use of non-SARS-CoV-2-specific IVIG except in the context of a clinical trial.[3]

**Evidence is limited.**

- A retrospective study of 58 patients with severe disease found that IVIG, when used as an adjuvant treatment within 48 hours of admission, may reduce the use of mechanical ventilation, reduce hospital/intensive care unit stay, and reduce 28-day mortality; however, this study had several limitations.[857]
- There is currently insufficient evidence to recommend IVIG.[858]

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing this drug.

**Stem cell therapy**

Mesenchymal stem cells are an investigational product and have been studied for their immunomodulatory properties. It is thought that they can reduce the pathological changes that occur in the lungs, and inhibit the cell-mediated immune inflammatory response.[859] Mesenchymal stem cells are not approved for this indication.

**The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends** against the use of mesenchymal stem cells except in the context of a clinical trial.[3]

**Evidence is limited.**

- Remestemcel-L (ex vivo cultured adult human mesenchymal stem cells from the bone marrow of healthy adult donors) is currently in phase 3 trials for the treatment of moderate to severe acute respiratory distress syndrome in ventilator-dependent patients. An interim analysis of data found that the trial is not likely to meet its 30-day mortality reduction end point and has stopped enrolment, although the trial will be completed with the patients currently enrolled, with follow-up as planned.[860]

**Interferons**

Interferons are a family of cytokines with antiviral properties. Interferons are already approved in some countries for certain conditions, but are off-label for this indication.

**The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends** against the use of interferons for the treatment of severe or critically ill patients except in the context of a clinical trial.[3]

**Evidence is limited.**

- The WHO Solidarity trial found that interferon beta-1a appears to have little or no effect on hospitalised patients, as indicated by overall mortality, initiation of ventilation, and duration of hospital stay.[810]
- A randomised, placebo-controlled, phase 2 trial found that nebulised interferon beta-1a was associated with a higher odds of clinical improvement and more rapid recovery.[861]
- A phase 2 trial found that peginterferon lambda reduced viral load and increased the number of participants with a negative nasopharyngeal swab at day 7 in outpatients with mild to moderate disease compared with placebo.[862][863]

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing these drugs.

**Vitamin D**
Vitamin D supplementation has been associated with a reduced risk of acute respiratory infections such as influenza.[864] [865] [866] [867]

The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel states that there are insufficient data to recommend either for or against vitamin D. [3]

The UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends vitamin D supplementation in adults (including pregnant and breastfeeding women), young people, and children over 4 years of age between October and early March (and at other times of the year if at risk of vitamin D deficiency) to maintain bone and muscle health. However, it does not recommend supplementation to solely prevent or treat COVID-19, except as part of a clinical trial.[868]

Evidence is limited.

- There is currently no evidence to recommend vitamin D for the prophylaxis or treatment of COVID-19.[869]
- A meta-analysis found that there may be a potential role for vitamin D supplementation in reducing disease severity, but noted that additional evidence is required.[870]
- A pilot randomised controlled trial found that high-dose calcifediol significantly reduced the need for intensive care unit treatment in hospitalised patients, and may improve clinical outcomes.[871]

Vitamin C

Vitamin C supplementation has shown promise in the treatment of viral infections.[872] High-dose intravenous vitamin C is being trialled in some centres for the treatment of severe disease.[873]

The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel states that there are insufficient data to recommend either for or against vitamin C for the treatment of non-critically ill or critically ill patients.[3]

Evidence is limited.

- There is no evidence to support or refute the use of vitamin C in the treatment of patients with COVID-19; however, several trials are ongoing.[874]
- A pilot randomised controlled trial found high-dose intravenous vitamin C may show potential benefit in improving oxygenation and reducing mortality in critically ill patients; however, the trial was underpowered.[875]

Colchicine

Colchicine is an anti-inflammatory agent that downregulates multiple pro-inflammatory pathways. It is thought that its inhibitory effects on neutrophil activity, cytokine generation, and the inflammation/thrombosis interface, along with an overall lack of evidence for systemic immunosuppression, make it a useful treatment.[876] Colchicine is already approved in some countries for indications such as gout and familial Mediterranean fever, but is off-label for this indication.

The UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency states that colchicine should not be used except in the context of a clinical trial, or unless there is an additional licensed indication for its use.[877]

Evidence is limited.

- Studies are inconclusive in patients with mild to moderate disease, and adverse effects are significant.[878] More randomised controlled trials are required. Colchicine is currently being studied in the RECOVERY trial.

Antibiotics
Azithromycin is a macrolide antibiotic, and doxycycline is a tetracycline antibiotic. Both are approved for use in various bacterial infections.

The UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency recommends that azithromycin and doxycycline should not be used within primary care (or hospitalised patients for azithromycin) unless there are additional indications for which their use remains appropriate.[879]

Evidence does not support the use of these drugs.

- The UK RECOVERY trial found that azithromycin showed no significant clinical benefit (i.e., length of hospital stay, need for invasive mechanical ventilation, 28-day mortality) in hospitalised patients compared with usual standard care alone.[880]
- The UK PRINCIPLE trial is currently evaluating three treatment strategies in older people (people aged over 65 years, or people aged over 50 years with an underlying health condition): usual care alone; usual care plus azithromycin; and usual care plus doxycycline.[881] An interim analysis of the trial concluded that azithromycin and doxycycline offered no meaningful beneficial effect, in terms of time to recovery, hospitalisation, or death compared with standard of care in patients aged 50 years and over who were treated at home in the early stages of infection.[879]

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing these drugs.

**Lopinavir/ritonavir**

Lopinavir/ritonavir is an oral protease inhibitor. It is approved for the treatment of HIV infection, but is off-label for this indication.

The World Health Organization strongly recommends against the use of lopinavir/ritonavir, regardless of disease severity. This recommendation is based on low- to moderate-certainty evidence.[595] [642]

The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends against the use of lopinavir/ritonavir except in the context of a clinical trial.[3]

- The Infectious Diseases Society of America also recommends against the use of lopinavir/ritonavir based on moderate-certainty evidence.[646]

Evidence does not support the use of this drug.

- The WHO Solidarity trial found that lopinavir/ritonavir appears to have little or no effect on hospitalised patients, as indicated by overall mortality, initiation of ventilation, and duration of hospital stay.[810]
- The UK RECOVERY trial found that there is no beneficial effect of lopinavir/ritonavir in hospitalised patients, with no significant difference in 28-day mortality, risk of progression to mechanical ventilation or death, or duration of hospital stay between the two treatment arms (lopinavir/ritonavir versus usual care alone).[882]
- A systematic review and meta-analysis found that lopinavir/ritonavir had no significant advantage in efficacy over standard care, no antivirals, or other antiviral treatments.[883]

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing this drug.

**Hydroxychloroquine/chloroquine**

Hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine are oral disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs with anti-inflammatory and immunomodulatory effects. These drugs have been shown to be effective against SARS-CoV-2 in vitro.[884] [885] Hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine are already approved in some countries for certain conditions, but are off-label for this indication.
The World Health Organization strongly recommends against the use of hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine, regardless of disease severity, based on low- to moderate-certainty evidence.\[595\] \[642\]

The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends against the use of hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine in hospitalised patients. The panel also recommends against the use of both drugs in non-hospitalised patients, except in the context of a clinical trial.\[3\]

- The Infectious Diseases Society of America also strongly recommends against the use of hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine in hospitalised patients based on moderate-certainty evidence.\[646\]

Evidence does not support the use of these drugs for treatment.

- A living systematic review concluded that there is low-strength evidence from trials and cohort studies that hydroxychloroquine has no positive effect on all-cause mortality or the need for mechanical ventilation. Trials show low strength of evidence for no positive effect on intubation or death and discharge from the hospital, whereas evidence from cohort studies about these outcomes remains insufficient. Data are insufficiently strong to support a treatment benefit of hydroxychloroquine for other outcomes (e.g., intensive care unit admission, symptom resolution). In trials where hydroxychloroquine is initiated in the outpatient setting, there is low strength of evidence that it reduces hospitalisation; however, there is insufficient evidence from cohort studies.\[886\] \[887\]
- The WHO Solidarity trial found that hydroxychloroquine appears to have little or no effect on hospitalised patients, as indicated by overall mortality, initiation of ventilation, and duration of hospital stay.\[810\]
- The UK RECOVERY trial found that hydroxychloroquine does not reduce the risk of death at 28 days compared with usual care.\[888\]

The US National Institutes of Health guidelines panel recommends against the use of hydroxychloroquine for post-exposure prophylaxis.\[3\]

Evidence is emerging for prophylaxis.

- A preprint meta-analysis found that early use of hydroxychloroquine in non-hospitalised patients reduced the risk of infection, hospitalisation, and death by 24%, with no serious adverse cardiac events reported.\[889\]
- A systematic review of 43 mainly retrospective or prospective observational preprint studies found hydroxychloroquine is effective when used early in the outpatient setting.\[890\]
- A randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial with 132 healthcare workers found that there was no significant difference in infection rates in participants receiving daily hydroxychloroquine for 8 weeks compared with placebo, and mild adverse effects were more common in the hydroxychloroquine arm. However, this trial was terminated early and may have been underpowered to detect a clinically important difference.\[891\]
- Post-exposure prophylaxis with hydroxychloroquine has not been shown to be effective in other trials.\[892\] \[893\] Use caution in patients with pre-existing cardiovascular disease and when using with other drugs that prolong the QT interval.

Consult local drug formulary for information about contraindications, cautions, adverse effects, and drug interactions before prescribing these drugs.

Clinical trials

Various other treatments are in clinical trials around the world.

- [Global coronavirus COVID-19 clinical trial tracker]

International trials to identify treatments that may be beneficial, such as the World Health Organization’s Solidarity trial, and the UK’s randomised evaluation of COVID-19 therapy (RECOVERY) trial, are ongoing. The RECOVERY Trial is currently testing these treatments: low-dose dexamethasone (children); colchicine; aspirin; tocilizumab; and casirivimab/imdevimab.
Primary prevention

Vaccines

- Vaccines are available under temporary emergency use or conditional marketing authorisations in various countries.
  - Immunisation programmes generally prioritise people who are at highest risk from serious disease or death (e.g., residents and staff in care homes, older people, healthcare workers, and those with underlying health conditions). However, priorities differ between countries and you should consult local guidance.
  - It is unknown whether vaccines prevent asymptomatic infection or transmission from individuals who are infected despite vaccination. Vaccinated people should continue to follow public health recommendations. Safety and efficacy, including duration of immunity, beyond 2 months is unknown. Advice will be updated as information on the impact of vaccination on virus transmission and indirect protection in the community is assessed.[324] [325] [326] [327] [328]
  - In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people who have been vaccinated do not need to quarantine after exposure to a person with COVID-19 provided they meet the following criteria: they have received both doses of the vaccine and at least 2 weeks have passed since the second dose; they are within 3 months of their last dose; and they have not developed symptoms of COVID-19 since their exposure.[329]
  - Surveillance of adverse events is extremely important, and may reveal additional, less frequent serious adverse events not detected in clinical trials.
    - For example, the Pandemrix® vaccine used during the 2009-2010 swine flu pandemic was withdrawn from the market due to an association with narcolepsy.[330]
    - The new authorised mRNA vaccines have not been authorised for use in humans previously, so there is no long-term safety and efficacy data available for these types of vaccines.
    - Laboratory-confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been reported after vaccination. Symptoms can be mistaken for vaccine-related adverse effects in the initial days after vaccination. Have a high level of suspicion of reported symptoms and avoid dismissing complaints as vaccine-related until vaccine recipients are tested and true infection is ruled out.[331]
    - All suspected adverse reactions should be reported via the Yellow Card scheme in the UK. [Yellow Card: coronavirus (COVID-19)]
    - All suspected adverse reactions should be reported via the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) in the US. [Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System]
  - Vaccine dose schedules may differ across locations.
    - There have been suggestions about extending the length of time between doses, reducing the number of doses, changing the dose (half-dose), or mixing and matching different COVID-19 vaccines in order to vaccinate more people. However, there is no evidence to support these strategies as yet.[332]
    - The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that countries experiencing exceptional epidemiological circumstances may consider delaying the administration of the second dose of mRNA vaccines for a short period (up to 42 days based on currently available clinical trial data) as a pragmatic approach to maximising the number of individuals benefiting from a first dose while vaccine supply continues to increase. However, evidence for this extension is not strong. Countries should ensure that any such programme adjustments to dose intervals do not affect the likelihood of receiving the second dose. The WHO does not support altering doses.[326] [327]
    - In the UK, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommends that delivery of the first dose of any vaccine to as many eligible individuals as possible should be initially
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Management

prioritised over delivery of a second dose.[333] [334] However, there is a lack of evidence to support an extended dose interval between the first and second dose, and this is outside of the manufacturer's authorised dose recommendations.[335]

- In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that the second dose of an mRNA vaccine can be scheduled for up to 6 weeks after the first dose if the recommended dosing interval cannot be met. The agency continues to emphasise that the second dose should be given as close to the recommended interval as possible, and states that the two mRNA vaccines that are available in the US may be considered interchangeable in exceptional circumstances.[329]
- Clinical trials have started in the UK to determine whether different vaccines may be used for the 2-dose regimen.[336]
- Consult local guidelines before administering vaccines. Patients must give free and voluntary informed consent prior to vaccination.[337]

- The table below compares the three main vaccines that have been authorised for use in many countries.

- In addition to these, CoronaVac® and Sinopharm® (inactivated version of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 [SARS-CoV-2] virus) have been authorised in China, and Sputnik V® (an adenovirus vector vaccine) has been authorised in Russia and is 91.6% effective.[338]
- Several other vaccine candidates are still in development including mRNA vaccines, DNA vaccines, viral vector vaccines, protein subunit vaccines, live-attenuated vaccines, inactivated virus vaccines, and intranasal delivery systems.[339]
- [WHO: draft landscape of COVID-19 candidate vaccines]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine</th>
<th>Moderna COVID-19 vaccine</th>
<th>AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Synonyms</strong></td>
<td>COVID-19 mRNA vaccine BNT162b2</td>
<td>COVID-19 mRNA vaccine mRNA-1273</td>
<td>COVID-19 vaccine ChAdOx1 S recombinant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vaccine type</strong></td>
<td>Lipid nanoparticle-formulated mRNA vaccine that encodes the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein</td>
<td>Adenovirus (chimpanzee) vector vaccine that carries the genetic code for the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Efficacy</strong></td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authorisation</strong></td>
<td>UK, US, Europe, Canada</td>
<td>UK, US, Europe</td>
<td>UK, Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indication</strong></td>
<td>Active immunisation of individuals ≥16 years of age</td>
<td>Active immunisation of individuals ≥18 years of age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authorised dose</strong></td>
<td>TWO-DOSE REGIMEN 0.3 mL (30 micrograms) IM; second dose at least 21 days after first dose</td>
<td>TWO-DOSE REGIMEN 0.5 mL (100 micrograms) IM; second dose at least 28 days after first dose</td>
<td>TWO-DOSE REGIMEN 0.5 mL IM (5 x 10¹⁰ viral particles); second dose 4-12 weeks after first dose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contraindications</strong></td>
<td>Hypersensitivity to active substance or any excipients; immediate allergic reaction to first dose (should not get second dose)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cautions</strong></td>
<td>History of anaphylaxis/allergic reactions</td>
<td>Acute severe febrile illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acute severe febrile illness</td>
<td>Bleeding disorders or anticoagulation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bleeding disorders or anticoagulation</td>
<td>Immunocompromised</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immunocompromised</td>
<td>Pregnancy and breastfeeding</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pregnancy and breastfeeding</td>
<td>Previous treatment with COVID-19 monoclonal antibodies or plasma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adverse events</strong></td>
<td><strong>Common</strong>: headache; arthralgia; myalgia; injection-site reactions; fatigue; fever; chills; nausea</td>
<td><strong>Common</strong>: headache; arthralgia; myalgia; injection-site reactions; fatigue; fever; chills; nausea; vomiting; diarrhoea; rash; lymphadenopathy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                         | **Uncommon**: lymphadenopathy; malaise; anaphylaxis | **Uncommon**: lymphadenopathy; malaise; acute peripheral facial paralysis; anaphylaxis | **Uncommon**: lymphadenopathy; dizziness; decreased appetite; abdominal pain;
### Comparison of selected authorized COVID-19 vaccines

Data is evolving; consult local drug formulary or guidelines for detailed information for your location. *See Vaccine efficacy data and Vaccine safety data sections below for detailed information. **Dose schedules may differ in some locations. Last reviewed/updated: 17 February 2021.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vaccines and anaphylaxis or vasovagal reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Severe allergic reactions, including anaphylaxis, have been reported outside of clinical trials in the general population after vaccination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In the US, monitoring by the VAERS detected 4.7 cases of anaphylaxis per million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, and 2.5 cases per million doses of the Moderna vaccine as of 18 January 2021.[340]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In the UK, monitoring of the Yellow Card reporting system detected 103 cases of anaphylaxis with the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine (1-2 cases per 100,000 doses), and 30 cases of anaphylaxis with the AstraZeneca vaccine as of 31 January 2021.[341]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It has been suggested that reactions after mRNA vaccines may be due to the presence of lipid pegylated ethylene glycol (PEG), or PEG derivatives such as polysorbates.[342]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The WHO recommends that a history of anaphylaxis to any component of the vaccine is a contraindication to vaccination for all vaccines. People with an immediate anaphylactic allergic reaction to the first dose should not receive additional doses. Administer vaccines only in settings where anaphylaxis can be treated, and observe for at least 15 minutes after vaccination.[326] [327] [328]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The WHO recommends people with an immediate non-anaphylactic allergic reaction to the first dose of an mRNA vaccine (i.e. urticaria, angio-oedema, or respiratory symptoms such as cough, stridor, or wheezing without any other symptoms within 4 hours of administration) should not receive additional doses unless recommended after review by a health professional with specialist expertise. A history of any immediate allergic reaction to any other vaccine or injectable therapy is considered a precaution, but not a contraindication, to vaccination. Perform a risk assessment to determine the type and severity of reaction and the reliability of the information. These people may still be vaccinated, but the risks should be weighed against the benefits of vaccination, and the recipient should be observed for 30 minutes after vaccination in healthcare settings where anaphylaxis can be treated immediately. Anaphylactic reactions have also been reported in people without a history of severe allergic reactions. Food, insect venom, contact, or seasonal allergies, and allergic rhinitis, eczema, and asthma are not considered a precaution. There is no contraindication or precaution to vaccination for people with latex, egg, or gelatin allergies.[326] [327]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The UK-based Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency recommends that anyone with a previous history of allergic reactions to the ingredients of the vaccine should not receive it, but those with any other allergies such as a food allergy can have the vaccine.[343]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Guidelines on vaccinating people with a history of allergy or anaphylaxis may differ across locations; consult local guidance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
People with a history of receiving dermal fillers may develop swelling at or near the site of filler injection (e.g., lips, face) following administration of an mRNA vaccine. This appears to be temporary and may be treated with corticosteroids. Delayed-onset local reactions around the injection site have been reported, and are sometimes quite large.[329] Anxiety-related reactions, including vasovagal reactions and hyperventilation, may occur. Ensure precautions are in place to avoid injury from fainting.

Vaccines and specific patient populations

- There are limited or no data available from clinical trials about the use of vaccines in specific patient populations. Despite this, the WHO recommends that the following populations may be vaccinated, depending on the vaccine used:[326] [327] [328]
  - Older people (without an upper age limit)
  - People with comorbidities that have been identified as increasing the risk for severe disease
  - Immunocompromised people who are part of a group recommended for vaccination
  - People living with HIV who are part of a group recommended for vaccination
  - People with autoimmune conditions who have no contraindications to vaccination and who are part of a group recommended for vaccination
  - People with a history of Bell’s palsy who have no contraindications to vaccination
  - People with a history of symptomatic or asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2 infection.
  - Delayed vaccination is recommended in people with an acute febrile illness or current acute COVID-19 (until they are afebrile and have recovered from acute illness), and in people who previously received passive antibody therapy for COVID-19 (for at least 90 days). Delayed vaccination may be considered in people who have had confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection in the preceding 6 months (until near the end of this period).
  - Antibody response to the first dose of mRNA vaccines in people with pre-existing immunity is equal to, or may exceed, titres found in those without pre-existing immunity after the second dose according to a preprint study. Also, reactogenicity is significantly higher in people who have been infected with SARS-CoV-2 in the past.[344]
  - The WHO recommends an individual risk–benefit assessment for very frail older persons with a life expectancy anticipated to be less than 3 months.[327] The Norwegian Medicines Agency recommends conducting more thorough evaluations of very frail older patients before vaccination, after 23 patients died shortly after receiving the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. However, it is currently unknown whether there is a connection between these deaths and the vaccine. The agency has investigated 13 of the deaths so far and has concluded that common adverse reactions of mRNA vaccines, such as fever, nausea, and diarrhoea, may have contributed to fatal outcomes in some of the frail patients.[345] [346]

Vaccines and pregnant/breastfeeding women

- Use caution in pregnant and breastfeeding women as there are no safety and efficacy data available.
  - The WHO recommends not using vaccines in pregnant women, unless the benefits outweigh the potential risks (e.g., healthcare workers at high risk of exposure, women with comorbidities that place them in a high-risk group for severe disease). It recommends that women who are breastfeeding, and who are part of a group recommended for vaccination, should be offered vaccination on an equivalent basis. It does not recommend delaying pregnancy or discontinuing breastfeeding after vaccination.[326] [327] [328]
  - Public Health England recommends that pregnant women should not routinely be vaccinated; however, vaccination may be considered when the potential benefits outweigh the potential risks for the mother and fetus.[347] It recommends that women who are breastfeeding can receive the vaccine.[348]
The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that COVID-19 vaccines should not be withheld from pregnant or breastfeeding women who meet criteria for vaccination based on recommended priority groups. Discuss the risks and benefits with the person before vaccination. Pregnant and breastfeeding women who decline vaccination should be supported in their decision.\[349\]

**Vaccine efficacy data**

- **Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine**

  Efficacy is based on an interim analysis of results from a phase 3 trial of 43,448 participants (with randomisation to vaccine and placebo arms in a 1:1 ratio). The vaccine is reported to be 95% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 after 2 doses compared with placebo (saline), in people aged 16 years and older. This is based on an analysis of 170 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with an onset at least 7 days after the second dose among recipients with no evidence of existing or prior SARS-CoV-2 infection (8 cases in the vaccine arm versus 162 cases in the placebo arm). Efficacy was 52% after the first dose. Among 10 cases of severe disease with onset after the first dose, 9 cases occurred in the placebo arm and 1 case occurred in the vaccine arm. This only provides preliminary evidence of vaccine-mediated protection against severe disease.\[324\]

  Preliminary studies suggest that the vaccine may be effective against new SARS-CoV-2 variants with spike protein mutations (i.e., B.1.1.7 and B.1.351 lineages and N501Y mutations); however, neutralisation of the B.1.351 variant may be weaker.\[350\] \[351\] \[352\] \[353\] \[354\] Further research is required.

- **Moderna COVID-19 vaccine**

  Efficacy is based on an interim analysis of results from a phase 3 trial of 30,420 participants (with randomisation to vaccine and placebo arms in a 1:1 ratio). The vaccine is reported to be 94.1% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 after 2 doses compared with placebo (saline) in people aged 18 years and older. This is based on an analysis of 196 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with an onset at least 14 days after the second dose among recipients with no evidence of existing or prior SARS-CoV-2 infection (11 cases in the vaccine arm versus 185 cases in the placebo arm). Among 30 cases of severe disease (including one fatality) with onset after the first dose, all cases occurred in the placebo arm and none in the vaccine arm.\[325\]

  Preliminary studies suggest that the vaccine may be effective against new SARS-CoV-2 variants with spike protein mutations (i.e., B.1.351 and B.1.1.7 lineages). Although neutralising antibody titres were lower for the B.1.351 variant compared with earlier SARS-CoV-2 variants, levels were expected to be protective, although this is yet to be confirmed.\[353\] \[355\] \[356\] Further research is required. The manufacturer will test an additional booster dose to study the ability to further increase neutralising titres against emerging strains beyond the existing primary vaccination series. It is also advancing an emerging variant booster candidate against the B.1.351 lineage variant (known as mRNA-1273.351) into preclinical and phase 1 trials.\[357\]

- **AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine**

  Efficacy is based on an interim analysis of pooled data from four ongoing randomised controlled clinical trials with 11,636 participants conducted in the UK, Brazil, and South Africa. The vaccine is reported to be 70.4% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 after 2 doses compared with control (meningococcal vaccine or saline) in people aged 18 years and older. This is based on an analysis of 131 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with an onset at least 15 days after the second dose among recipients with no evidence of existing or prior SARS-CoV-2 infection (30 cases in the vaccine arm versus 101 cases in the placebo arm). Trial results are yet to be published. Efficacy and safety data are currently limited in people ≥65 years of age.\[358\]

  Vaccine efficacy appears to be higher when the interval between doses is longer. Data from a preprint study includes results of a further month of data collection with 332 cases of asymptomatic disease reported. The study found that a single standard dose provides 76% protection overall against symptomatic disease in the first 90 days after vaccination. Efficacy reached 82.4% after the second dose in those with a dosing interval of 12 weeks or more.
However, the efficacy was only 54.9% if the two doses were given less than 6 weeks apart.\[359\] The WHO recommends an interval of 8 to 12 weeks between doses.\[328\]

- A preprint study suggests that the vaccine may be effective against symptomatic infection caused by the B.1.1.7 SARS-CoV-2 variant.\[360\] However, rollout of the vaccine in South Africa has been paused after a study found that it did not protect against mild and moderate disease caused by the B.1.351 variant.\[361\]

**Vaccine safety data**

**• Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine**

- Safety is based on an interim analysis of results from a phase 3 trial of 43,448 participants. The reactogenicity subset included 8183 participants.\[324\]
- Local adverse reactions were more common in the vaccine group compared with placebo, with the most common reaction being injection-site pain within 7 days after injection (83% after the first dose and 78% after the second dose in younger participants; 71% after the first dose and 66% after the second dose in older participants). Less than 1% of participants reported severe pain. Local adverse reactions were similar after the first and second doses.
- Systemic adverse reactions were more common in the vaccine group compared with placebo, and were reported more often by younger patients and after the second dose. The most commonly reported systemic adverse reactions after the second dose were fatigue (59% in younger participants; 51% in older participants), headache (52% in younger participants; 39% in older participants), and fever (16% in younger participants; 11% in older participants). Severe systemic events were reported in <2% of participants after either dose, except for fatigue and headache after the second dose.
- Other rare adverse events included lymphadenopathy, shoulder injury (related to vaccine administration), paroxysmal ventricular arrhythmia, and right leg paraesthesia.

**• Moderna COVID-19 vaccine**

- Safety is based on an interim analysis of results from a phase 3 trial of 30,420 participants.\[325\]
- Solicited local and systemic adverse reactions were reported in 87.8% of participants within 7 days after the first dose in the vaccine group compared with 48% in the placebo group, and 92.2% of participants within 7 days after the second dose in the vaccine group compared with 42.8% in the placebo group. The most commonly reported solicited adverse reactions included injection-site reactions, fatigue, headache, myalgia, and arthralgia. These reactions were more commonly reported and were more severe after the second dose. Solicited adverse reactions were more common among participants aged 18 to 64 years compared with adults aged ≥65 years.
- Unsolicited adverse events related to vaccination (up to 28 days after any injection) were reported in 8.2% of participants in the vaccine group compared with 4.5% in the placebo group. The incidence of severe adverse events was higher in the vaccine group compared with the placebo group (0.5% versus 0.2%). The most commonly reported unsolicited adverse events (reported in at least 1% of participants) were fatigue and headache. The relative incidence of these events was not affected by age.
- Bell’s palsy occurred more commonly in the vaccine group (three cases) compared with the placebo group (one case), suggesting that it may be more than a chance event. This will require close monitoring as larger populations are vaccinated outside of clinical trials.

**• AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine**
• Safety is based on an interim analysis of pooled data from four ongoing randomised controlled clinical trials with 23,745 participants conducted in the UK, Brazil, and South Africa (trial results are yet to be published).[358]

• The most frequently reported adverse events were: injection-site reactions (>60%); headache, fatigue (>50%); myalgia, malaise (>40%); fever, chills (>30%); arthralgia, nausea (>20%). Adverse reactions were milder and reported less frequently after the second dose and in adults aged ≥65 years.

Vaccine trial limitations

• A key limitation of the data is the short duration of safety and efficacy follow-up. Trials were not sufficiently powered to detect less common adverse events reliably, and the median follow-up time was only 2 months after the second dose. Trials do not address whether the vaccine prevents transmission or affects infectiousness, and the duration of protection is yet to be determined. There are no data on children or younger adolescents, pregnant or breastfeeding women, or immunocompromised people. There are also no data to assess efficacy in populations at high risk of severe disease, in people previously infected with SARS-CoV-2, against long-term effects of disease, or against mortality.[324][325]

• There are concerns that the trials were not designed to detect a reduction in any serious outcome such as hospital admissions, use of intensive care, or deaths, or whether the vaccines can interrupt transmission of the virus – two key primary end points in vaccine efficacy trials.[362] Also, since the trials have been published, important questions about final efficacy data exclusions, as well as concerns about the use of pain and fever medications, unblinding, and primary event adjudication committees have been raised.[363]

• Planned long-term follow-up of participants is unlikely to occur in the context of trials due to the ethics of following a placebo recipient long-term without offering the vaccine. This could inadvertently threaten ongoing vaccine research that is yet to define immunological correlates of protection against COVID-19, which could vary according to the vaccine platform, individual characteristics, age groups, and population subset.[364][365][366]

• Previous trials of coronavirus vaccines identified cellular immunopathology and antibody-dependent enhancement (ADE) as potential safety issues. There are concerns over ADE of SARS-CoV-2 due to subsequent exposure to wild-type SARS-CoV-2 post vaccination and prior exposure to other coronaviruses (such as those that cause the common cold).[367][368] Available data do not indicate a risk of vaccine-enhanced disease with the mRNA vaccines; however, data are limited and the risk over time, potentially associated with waning immunity, remains unknown and needs to be evaluated further.[324][325]

Infection prevention and control for healthcare professionals

• Always consult local infection prevention and control protocols; only basic principles are detailed here.

• Immediately isolate all suspected or confirmed cases in an area that is separate from other patients. Place patients in adequately ventilated single rooms if possible. When single rooms are not available, place all cases together in the same room and ensure there is at least 1 metre (3 feet) between patients.[369]

• Implement standard precautions at all times:[369]

  • Practice hand and respiratory hygiene
  • Give patients a medical mask to wear
  • Wear appropriate personal protective equipment
  • Practice safe waste management and environmental cleaning.

• Implement additional contact and droplet precautions before entering a room where cases are admitted:[369]

  • Wear a medical mask, gloves, an appropriate gown, and eye/facial protection (e.g., goggles or a face shield)
• Use single-use or disposable equipment.

• Implement airborne precautions when performing aerosol-generating procedures, including placing patients in a negative pressure room. [369]

• Some countries and organisations recommend airborne precautions for any situation involving the care of a COVID-19 patient.

• All specimens collected for laboratory investigations should be regarded as potentially infectious. [369]

• Appropriate personal protective equipment gives healthcare workers a high level of protection against COVID-19. A cross-sectional study of 420 healthcare workers deployed to Wuhan with appropriate personal protective equipment tested negative for SARS-CoV-2 on molecular and serological testing when they returned home, despite all participants having direct contact with COVID-19 patients and performing at least one aerosol-generating procedure. [370] Standard surgical masks are as effective as respirator masks for preventing infection of healthcare workers in outbreaks of viral respiratory illnesses such as influenza, but it is unknown whether this applies to COVID-19. [371]

• Detailed infection prevention and control guidance is available:

  • [WHO: infection prevention and control during health care when coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is suspected or confirmed]
  • [CDC: interim infection prevention and control recommendations for healthcare personnel during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic]
  • [BMJ: covid-19 – PPE guidance]

Telehealth for primary care physicians

• It is important that primary care physicians avoid in-person assessment of patients with suspected COVID-19 in primary care when possible to avoid infection. [372] Most patients can be managed remotely by telephone or video consultations. Algorithms for dealing with these patients are available:

  • [BMJ: covid-19 in primary care (UK)]
  • [BMJ: covid-19 – a remote assessment in primary care]

General prevention measures for the general public

• People should be advised to: [373] [374]

  • Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser (that contains at least 60% alcohol), especially after being in a public place, blowing their nose, or coughing/sneezing. Avoid touching the eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands

  • Avoid close contact with people (i.e., maintain a distance of at least 1 metre [3 feet]) including shaking hands, particularly those who are sick, have a fever, or are coughing or sneezing. Avoid going to crowded and poorly ventilated places. It is important to note that recommended distances differ between countries (for example, 2 metres is recommended in the US and UK) and you should consult local guidance. However, there is no evidence to support a distance of 2 metres [375]

  • Practice respiratory hygiene (i.e., cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, discard tissue immediately in a closed bin, and wash hands)

  • Seek medical care early if they have a fever, cough, and difficulty breathing, and share their previous travel and contact history (travellers or suspected/confirmed cases) with their healthcare provider

  • Stay at home and self-isolate if they are sick, even with mild symptoms, until they recover (except to get medical care)
• Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily (e.g., light switches, door knobs, countertops, handles, phones).

• [BMJ Learning: Covid-19 – handwashing technique and PPE videos]
• [WHO: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public]
• [Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine: what is the evidence to support the 2-metre social distancing rule to reduce COVID-19 transmission?]

Face masks in community settings

• Recommendations on the use of face masks in community settings vary between countries.[376] It is mandatory to wear a mask in public in certain countries or in certain situations, and masks may be worn in some countries according to local cultural habits. Consult local public health guidance for more information.

• There is no high-quality or direct scientific evidence to support the widespread use of masks by healthy people in the community setting, and there are risks and benefits that must be considered. Data on effectiveness is based on limited and inconsistent observational and epidemiological studies.[87] The first randomised controlled trial to investigate the efficacy of masks in the community (in addition to other public health measures such as social distancing) found that the recommendation to wear surgical masks when outside the home among others did not reduce incident SARS-CoV-2 infection compared with no mask recommendation. However, the study did not assess whether masks could decrease disease transmission from mask wearers to others.[377] A Cochrane review found that wearing a mask may make little to no difference in how many people caught influenza-like illnesses; however, this is based on low-certainty evidence, and does not include results of studies from the current COVID-19 pandemic.[378] Evidence for mask effectiveness for respiratory tract infection prevention is stronger in healthcare settings compared with community settings; direct evidence on comparative effectiveness in SARS-CoV-2 infection is insufficient.[379] [380] Randomised trials have not addressed the question of source control.

• Despite the lack of good-quality evidence, the WHO advises that in areas of known or suspected community or cluster transmission, people should wear a non-medical mask in the following circumstances: indoor or outdoor settings where physical distancing cannot be maintained; indoor settings with inadequate ventilation, regardless of whether physical distancing can be maintained; and situations when physical distancing cannot be maintained and the person has a higher risk of severe complications (e.g., older age, underlying condition). Carers and those living with suspected or confirmed cases should wear a medical mask when in the same room, regardless of whether the case has symptoms. Children aged up to 5 years should not wear masks for source control. A risk-based approach is recommended for children aged 6 to 11 years. Special considerations are required for immunocompromised children, or children with certain diseases, developmental disorders, or disabilities. The WHO advises that people should not wear masks during vigorous-intensity physical activity. Use of a mask alone is insufficient to provide adequate protection, and they should be used in conjunction with other infection prevention and control measures such as frequent hand hygiene and social distancing.[87]

• Potential harms and disadvantages of wearing masks include: potential increased risk of self-contamination due to manipulation of face mask and touching face/eyes, or when non-medical masks are not changed when wet or soiled; headache and/or breathing difficulties; facial skin lesions, irritant dermatitis, or worsening acne; discomfort; difficulty communicating; social and psychological acceptance; false sense of security; poor compliance; waste management issues; and difficulties for patients with chronic respiratory conditions or breathing problems.[87] Masks may also create a humid habitat where the virus can remain active and this may increase viral load in the respiratory tract; deeper breathing caused by wearing a mask may push the virus deeper into the lungs.[381]

• Cloth masks have limited efficacy in preventing viral transmission compared with medical-grade masks.[382] Efficacy depends on the type of material used, the number of layers, the degree of moisture in the mask, and the fitting of the mask on the face. In a study comparing the use of cloth masks to surgical masks in healthcare workers, the rates of all infection outcomes were highest in the cloth mask arm, with the rate of influenza-like illness statistically significantly higher in this group. Moisture retention, reuse of cloth masks, and poor filtration may result in increased risk of infection.[383]

• [BMJ: facemasks for the prevention of infection in healthcare and community settings]
Alcohol-based hand sanitisers

- The CDC has issued a warning about alcohol-based sanitisers containing methanol (which may be labelled as containing ethanol). Methanol poisoning should be considered in patients who present with relevant signs and symptoms (e.g., headache, impaired vision, nausea/vomiting, abdominal pain, loss of co-ordination, decreased level of consciousness) who report ingestion of hand sanitiser or frequent repeated topical use. Cases of permanent blindness and death have been reported.[384]
- Frequent use of hand sanitisers may result in antimicrobial resistance. Accidental ingestion and unintentional ocular exposures, especially by children, have also been reported.[385] [386]

Travel-related control measures

- Many countries have implemented travel-related control measures including complete closure of borders, partial travel restrictions, entry or exit screening, and/or quarantine of travellers. Overall, low to very low evidence suggests that travel-related control measures may help to limit the spread of infection across national borders. Cross-border travel restrictions are likely to be more effective than entry and exit screening, and screening is likely to be more effective in combination with other measures (e.g., quarantine, observation).[387]
- **Entry/exit screening:** people travelling from areas with a high risk of infection may be screened using questionnaires about their travel, contact with ill persons, symptoms of infection, and/or measurement of their temperature. Low-certainty evidence suggests that screening at travel hubs may slightly slow the importation of infected cases; however, the evidence base comes from two mathematical model studies and is limited by their assumptions. Evidence suggests that one-time screening in apparently healthy people may miss between 40% and 100% of people who are infected, although the certainty of this ranges from very low to moderate. In very low-prevalence settings, screening for symptoms or temperature may result in few false negatives and many true negatives, despite low overall accuracy. Repeated screenings may result in more cases being identified eventually and reduced harm from false reassurance.[388] Entry screening at three major US airports found a low yield of laboratory-diagnosed cases (one case per 85,000 travellers) between January and September 2020.[389]
- **Quarantine:** enforced quarantine is being used to isolate easily identifiable cohorts of people at potential risk of recent exposure. Despite limited evidence, a Cochrane review found quarantine to be important in reducing the number of people infected and deaths, especially when started earlier and when used in combination with other prevention and control measures. However, the current evidence is limited because most studies are based on mathematical modelling studies that make assumptions on important model parameters.[390] The psychosocial effects of enforced quarantine may have long-lasting repercussions.[391] [392]
- Travellers who arrive in the UK are required to self-isolate for 10 days unless they have travelled from an exempt country. Travellers who have visited a country with a travel ban in the 10 days before arrival must self-isolate, along with their household, for 10 days from the day of departure from these countries. [Public Health England: coronavirus (COVID-19) – how to self-isolate when you travel to the UK]

Social distancing

- Many countries have implemented mandatory social distancing measures in order to reduce and delay transmission (e.g., city lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, curfews, non-essential business closures, bans on gatherings, school and university closures, travel restrictions and bans, remote working, quarantine of exposed people).
- Although the evidence for social distancing for COVID-19 is limited, it is emerging, and the best available evidence appears to support social distancing measures to reduce the transmission and delay spread. The timing and duration of these measures appears to be critical.[393] [394] When comparing countries with more restrictive non-pharmaceutical interventions (e.g., mandatory stay-at-home and business closure orders) to countries with less restrictive non-pharmaceutical interventions, implementing any non-pharmaceutical interventions was associated with a significant reduction in case growth. However, there was no clear, significant beneficial effect of more restrictive non-pharmaceutical interventions compared with less restrictive nonpharmaceutical interventions in any of the countries studied. It should be noted that the study has important limitations.[395]
Researchers in Singapore found that social distancing measures (isolation of infected individuals and family quarantine, school closures, and workplace distancing) significantly decreased the number of infections in simulation models.\[396]\n
Harms must also be considered. Public health policies mostly rely on models and these models often ignore potential harms including excess death and inequalities arising from economic damage, negative health effects, and effects on vulnerable populations.\[397]\n
Negative consequences of community-based mass quarantine include psychological distress, food insecurity, economic challenges, diminished healthcare access, heightened communication inequalities, alternative delivery of education, and gender-based violence.\[398]\n
**Shielding extremely vulnerable people**

- Shielding is a measure used to protect vulnerable people (including children) who are at very high risk of severe illness from COVID-19 because they have an underlying health condition. Shielding involves minimising all interactions between those who are extremely vulnerable and other people to protect them from coming into contact with the virus.
- Extremely vulnerable groups include:\[399]\n  - Solid organ transplant recipients
  - People with specific cancers
  - People with severe respiratory conditions (e.g., cystic fibrosis, severe asthma, or severe COPD)
  - People with rare diseases that significantly increase the risk of infections (e.g., homozygous sickle cell disease, severe combined immunodeficiency)
  - People on immunosuppression therapies sufficient to significantly increase the risk of infection
  - People with spleen problems (e.g., prior splenectomy)
  - Adults with Down’s syndrome
  - Adults on dialysis or with chronic kidney disease
  - Women who are pregnant with significant heart disease (congenital or acquired)
  - Other people who have also been classed as clinically extremely vulnerable based on clinical judgement and an assessment of their needs.

- The UK government recommends that clinically extremely vulnerable people are urged to follow specific precautions based on current public health restrictions:
  - [Public Health England: guidance on shielding and protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable from COVID-19]
  - Consult current guidance for specific recommendations (recommendations may differ between countries).
  - Shielding advice for children and young adults is available. Consult current guidance for specific recommendations (recommendations may differ between countries).
    - [Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health: COVID-19 – guidance on clinically extremely vulnerable children and young people]

**Lifestyle modifications**

- Lifestyle modifications (e.g., smoking cessation, weight loss) may help to reduce the risk of COVID-19, and may be a useful adjunct to other interventions.\[400]\n
- The WHO recommends that tobacco users stop using tobacco given the well-established harms associated with tobacco use and second-hand smoke exposure.\[239]\n

**Pre-exposure or post-exposure prophylaxis**
Management

- There are no drugs recommended for pre-exposure prophylaxis or post-exposure prophylaxis, except in the context of a clinical trial.[3] See the [Emerging] section for more information.

Immunity passports

- Some governments are discussing or implementing certifications for people who have contracted and recovered from COVID-19 based on antibody tests (sometimes called ‘immunity passports’). Possession of a passport would allow people to have a greater range of privileges (e.g., work, education, travel). However, the WHO does not support these certifications as there is currently no evidence that people who have recovered from infection and have antibodies are protected from reinfection.[401] Other potential issues include lack of public support for these measures, potential for discrimination of groups of people, testing errors (including cross-reactivity with other human coronaviruses), access to testing, fraud, legal and ethical objections, and people getting infected intentionally in order to obtain a certification.[402]

Patient discussions

General prevention measures

- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser (that contains at least 60% alcohol), especially after being in a public place, blowing your nose, or coughing/sneezing. Avoid touching the eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people (i.e., maintain a distance of at least 1 metre [3 feet]) including shaking hands, particularly those who are sick, have a fever, or are coughing or sneezing. Avoid going to crowded and poorly ventilated places. It is important to note that recommended distances differ between countries (for example, 2 metres [6 feet] is recommended in the US and UK) and you should consult local guidance.
- Practice respiratory hygiene (i.e., cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, discard tissue immediately in a closed bin, and wash hands).
- Stay at home if you are sick, even with mild symptoms, until you recover (except to get medical care)
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily (e.g., light switches, door knobs, countertops, handles, phones).[373] [374]
- [BMJ Learning: Covid-19 – handwashing technique and PPE videos]
- [WHO: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public]

Face masks

- Despite the lack of good-quality evidence, the World Health Organization (WHO) advises that in areas of known or suspected community or cluster transmission, people should wear a non-medical mask in the following circumstances: indoor or outdoor settings where physical distancing cannot be maintained; indoor settings with inadequate ventilation, regardless of whether physical distancing can be maintained; and situations when physical distancing cannot be maintained and the person has a higher risk of severe complications (e.g., older age, underlying condition). Carers and those living with suspected or confirmed cases should wear a medical mask when in the same room, regardless of whether the case has symptoms. Children aged up to 5 years should not wear masks for source control. A risk-based approach is recommended for children aged 6 to 11 years. Special considerations are required for immunocompromised children, or children with certain diseases, developmental disorders, or disabilities. The WHO advises that people should not wear
masks during vigorous-intensity physical activity. Use of a mask alone is insufficient to provide adequate protection, and they should be used in conjunction with other infection prevention and control measures such as frequent hand hygiene and social distancing.[87]  
- [WHO: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public – when and how to use masks]  
- [Public Health England: how to make a cloth face covering]  
- [CDC: use of masks to help slow the spread of COVID-19]  

**Pulse oximetry**

- Patients may be required to use a pulse oximeter in the home setting. Patient education and appropriate follow-up are required.  
  - [Health Education England: adult pulse oximetry monitoring video]

**Travel advice**

- Many countries have implemented international travel bans/closed their borders, have issued advice for domestic travel. Some countries are restricting entry to foreign nationals who have been to affected areas in the preceding 14 days, or are enforcing quarantine periods (e.g., at home or in a designated facility such as a medi-hotel) where the person’s health and infection status are closely monitored. Some countries are requiring a negative test before departure and after arrival, and are implementing travel measures to protect against new international variants of the virus. Masks may be mandatory on flights.  
  - Consult local guidance for specific travel restriction recommendations in your country:  
    - [WHO: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) travel advice]  
    - [CDC: coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) – travel]  
    - [NaTHNac: travel health pro]  
    - [UK Department for Transport]  
    - [Smartraveller Australia: COVID-19]  
    - [Government of Canada: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) – travel restrictions, exemptions, and advice]  
    - [Ministry of Manpower Singapore: advisories on COVID-19]

**Pets and animals**

- At this time, there is no evidence that companion animals (including pets and other animals) play a significant role in the spread of COVID-19, and the risk of animals spreading COVID-19 to people is considered to be very low. There is no evidence that the virus can spread to people from the skin or fur of companion animals.[1090]  
  - A very small number of pets have been reported to be infected with the virus after close contact with people with confirmed COVID-19; however, thousands of pets have been tested in the US with none testing positive. There is evidence that cats and ferrets are highly susceptible to severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infection, while dogs and other livestock have no or low susceptibility. Large cats in captivity (lions, tigers, and a puma) and domestic pet cats have tested positive after contact with symptomatic humans. Transmission between cats has also been reported. The virus has been reported in mink on farms, and once the virus is introduced on a farm, can spread between mink, and between mink and other animals on the farm. There is also
the possibility that mink may transmit the infection to humans in these environments.[1091][1092][1093][1094][1095] Gorillas in a US zoo have tested positive. It is suspected that the gorillas acquired the infection from an asymptomatic staff member.[1096]

- Advise patients to limit their contact with their pets and other animals, especially while they are symptomatic. Advise people to not let pets interact with people or animals outside the household, and if a member of the household becomes unwell to isolate them from everyone else, including pets.[1097]
- [CDC: coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) – pets and other animals]

**Return to physical activity**

- Recommend a phased return to exercise only when the patient has been symptom-free for at least 7 days. Advise patients to begin with at least 2 weeks of minimal exertion, and to use daily self-monitoring to track progress and decide whether to move up or drop back a phase. Patients who have a history of severe disease, cardiac involvement, ongoing symptoms, or adverse psychological symptoms require further clinical assessment before returning to physical activity.[1098]
- Guidance on return to sports after COVID-19 in children is available from the American Academy of Pediatrics:
  - [AAP: COVID-19 interim guidance – return to sports]
Suggested return to physical activity after COVID-19: risk stratification to exclude features suggestive of myocarditis or post-acute COVID-19 and phased resumption of physical activity after 7 days without symptoms

**BMJ. 2021;372:m4721**

### Resources

- [WHO: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic]
- [CDC: coronavirus (COVID-19)]
- [NHS England: coronavirus (COVID-19)]
- [NHS England: your COVID recovery]
Monitoring

Regularly monitor the following in hospitalised patients to facilitate early recognition of deterioration and monitor for complications:[2] [635]

- Vital signs (temperature, respiratory rate, heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen saturation)
- Haematological and biochemistry parameters
- Coagulation parameters (D-dimer, fibrinogen, platelet count, prothrombin time)
- ECG
- Chest imaging
- Signs and symptoms of venous or arterial thromboembolism.

Medical early warning scores

- Utilise medical early warning scores that facilitate early recognition and escalation of treatment of deteriorating patients (e.g., National Early Warning Score 2 [NEWS2], Paediatric Early Warning Signs [PEWS]) where possible.[2]
- There are no data on the value of using these scores in patients with COVID-19 in the primary care setting.[1078]

Pregnant women

- Monitor vital signs three to four times daily and fetal heart rate in pregnant women with confirmed infection who are symptomatic and admitted to hospital. Perform fetal growth ultrasounds and Doppler assessments to monitor for potential intrauterine growth restriction in pregnant women with confirmed infection who are asymptomatic.[690] Perform fetal growth ultrasound 14 days after resolution of symptoms.[692]

Post-discharge follow-up

- Patients who have had suspected or confirmed COVID-19 (of any disease severity) who have persistent, new, or changing symptoms should have access to follow-up care.[2]
- Guidelines for the respiratory follow-up of patients with COVID-19 pneumonia have been published. Follow-up algorithms depend on the severity of pneumonia, and may include clinical consultation and review (face-to-face or telephone) by a doctor or nurse, chest imaging, pulmonary function tests, echocardiogram, sputum sampling, walk test, and assessment of oxygen saturation.[1079]
- More than half of patients discharged from hospital had lung function and chest imaging abnormalities 12 weeks after symptom onset.[1080] Pulmonary function tests may reveal altered diffusion capacity, a restrictive pattern, or an obstructive pattern.[1081]

Prognostic scores in development

- Various prognostic and clinical risk scores are being researched or developed for COVID-19; however, further external validation across various populations is needed before their use can be recommended. The World Health Organization recommends using clinical judgement, including consideration of the patient’s values and preferences and local and national policy if available, to guide management decisions including admission to hospital and to the intensive care unit, rather than currently available prediction models for prognosis.[2]

  - **A-DROP** : a modified version of CURB-65 that showed better accuracy of in-hospital death prediction on admission in patients with COVID-19 pneumonia compared with other widely used community-acquired pneumonia scores.[1082]
  - **APACHE II** : an effective clinical tool to predict hospital mortality that performed better than SOFA and CURB-65 scores in patients with COVID-19. A score of 17 or more is an early indicator of death and may help provide guidance to make further clinical decisions.[1083]
• **CALL**: a risk factor scoring system that scores patients based on four factors: comorbidities, age, lymphocyte count, and lactate dehydrogenase level. One study found that 96% of patients with low CALL scores did not progress to severe disease.[1084]

• **COVID-GRAM**: a web-based calculator that estimates the probability that a patient will develop critical illness and relies on the following 10 variables at admission: chest radiographic abnormality, age, haemoptysis, dyspnoea, unconsciousness, number of comorbidities, cancer history, neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio, lactate dehydrogenase, and direct bilirubin. Additional validation studies, especially outside of China, are required.[1085]

• **COVID-19MRS**: a rapid, operator-independent clinical tool that was found to objectively predict mortality in one retrospective cohort study.[1086]

• **3F**: a mortality prediction model based on three clinical features: age, minimum oxygen saturation, and type of patient encounter (i.e., inpatient vs outpatient and telehealth encounters). One study found that the model showed high accuracy when applied to retrospective and prospective data sets of COVID-19 patients.[1087]

• **4C**: a score developed and validated in a UK prospective cohort study of adults admitted to hospital with COVID-19. The score uses patient demographics, clinical observations, and blood parameters commonly available at the time of hospital admission, and can accurately characterise patients as being at low, intermediate, high, or very high risk of death. The score outperformed other risk stratification tools, showed clinical decision-making utility, and had similar performance to more complex models.[1088]

• **QCOVID**: a novel clinical risk prediction algorithm to estimate the risk of hospital admission and mortality based on age, ethnicity, deprivation, body mass index, and a range of comorbidities. A population-based cohort study found that the algorithm performed well, showing very high levels of discrimination for deaths and hospital admissions.[1089]
Complications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complications</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>post-intensive care syndrome</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>high</td>
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Early reports suggest that COVID-19 patients treated in the intensive care unit can present with post-intensive care syndrome, a spectrum of psychiatric, cognitive, and/or physical disability (e.g., muscle weakness, cognitive dysfunction, insomnia, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, delirium, encephalopathy) that affects survivors of critical illness, and persists after the patient has been discharged from the intensive care unit. Weakness affects 33% of patients who receive mechanical ventilation, 50% of patients with sepsis, and <50% of patients who remain in the intensive care unit for more than 1 week. Cognitive dysfunction affects 30% to 80% of patients. The risk can be minimised with medication management, physical rehabilitation, family support, and follow-up clinics. [3] [958]

| venous thromboembolism            | variable  | high       |

The pooled incidence of venous thromboembolism, deep vein thrombosis, and pulmonary embolism among hospitalised patients was 17%, 12%, and 7%, respectively. [959] The incidence was higher in patients admitted to the intensive care unit. The pooled incidence was 10% in non-intensive care settings, and 28% in intensive care settings. [960] COVID-19 patients with thromboembolic events have 1.93 times the odds of dying compared with patients without venous thromboembolism. [961]

Coagulopathy in COVID-19 has a prothrombotic character, which may explain reports of thromboembolic complications. [962] Patients may be predisposed to venous thromboembolism due to the direct effects of COVID-19, or the indirect effects of infection (e.g., severe inflammatory response, critical illness, traditional risk factors). [634] Thrombotic events may be due to cytokine storm, hypoxic injury, endothelial dysfunction, hypercoagulability, and/or increased platelet activity. [963]

The risk factors with the most evidence for being predictive of venous thromboembolism are older age and elevated D-dimer levels. [964] Patients with very high D-dimer levels have the greatest risk of thrombosis and may benefit from active monitoring. [555] [556]

If venous thromboembolism is suspected, perform a computed tomographic angiography or ultrasound of the venous system of the lower extremities. [965]

Treat patients with a thromboembolic event (or who are highly suspected to have thromboembolic disease if imaging is not possible) with therapeutic doses of anticoagulant therapy as per the standard of care for patients without COVID-19. There are currently insufficient data to recommend either for or against using therapeutic doses of antithrombotic or thrombolytic agents for COVID-19. Patients who require extracorporeal membrane oxygenation or continuous renal replacement therapy, or who have thrombosis of catheters or extracorporeal filters, should be treated with antithrombotic therapy as per the standard institutional protocols for those without COVID-19. [3]

Initial parenteral anticoagulation with a low molecular weight heparin or unfractionated heparin is preferred in acutely ill hospitalised patients; however, direct oral anticoagulants may be used provided there is no potential for drug-drug interactions (lead-in therapy with a parenteral anticoagulant is required for dabigatran and edoxaban). Warfarin can be used after overlap with initial parenteral anticoagulation. Parenteral anticoagulation with a low molecular weight heparin or fondaparinux is preferred over unfractionated heparin in critically ill patients. Direct oral anticoagulants are the preferred option in outpatients provided there is no potential for drug-drug interactions, with warfarin considered a suitable alternative. Anticoagulation therapy is recommended for a minimum of 3 months. Thrombolytic therapy is recommended in select patients with pulmonary embolism. [632]

The American Society of Hematology has published draft guideline recommendations on the use of anticoagulation in patients with COVID-19. [966]
### Complications

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<th>Timeframe</th>
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<td>A high incidence (14.7%) of asymptomatic deep vein thrombosis was reported in a cohort of patients with COVID-19 pneumonia.[967] An autopsy study of 12 patients revealed deep vein thrombosis in 58% of patients in whom venous thromboembolism was not suspected before death.[968] These studies highlight the importance of having a high suspicion for venous thromboembolism in patients who have signs of coagulopathy, including elevated D-dimer level. While these patients are at higher risk of thrombotic events, they may also be at an elevated risk for bleeding. In a small retrospective study, 11% of patients at high risk of venous thromboembolism also had a high risk of bleeding.[969] Antiphospholipid antibodies and lupus anticoagulant have been detected in a small number of critically ill patients. The presence of these antibodies can rarely lead to thrombotic events in some patients (especially those who are genetically predisposed) that are difficult to differentiate from other causes of multifocal thrombosis. In other patients, antiphospholipid antibodies may be transient and disappear within a few weeks. The significance of this finding is unknown, although it is thought that these antibodies may not be involved in the pathogenesis of venous thromboembolism in patients with severe COVID-19. Anticoagulation should be considered in these patients.[970] [971] [972] [973] [974] It has been suggested that a new term (e.g., COVID-19-associated pulmonary thrombosis, diffuse pulmonary intravascular coagulopathy, or microvascular COVID-19 lung vessels obstructive thrombo-inflammatory syndrome [MicroCLOTS]) be used rather than the term pulmonary embolism as it has been hypothesised that the pathophysiology is different; local thrombi are formed in the lung vessels due to a local inflammatory process rather than the classical emboli coming from elsewhere in the body.[975] [976] [977] However, this has not become accepted practice. Cases of arterial thrombosis, cerebral venous thrombosis, and acute limb ischaemia secondary to thrombosis have been reported.[978] [979] [980] [981] [982]</td>
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### Cardiovascular Complications

**COVID-19** is associated with a high inflammatory burden that can result in cardiovascular complications with a variety of clinical presentations. Inflammation in the myocardium can result in myocarditis, heart failure, arrhythmias, acute coronary syndrome, rapid deterioration, and sudden death.[983] [984] These complications can occur on presentation or develop as the severity of illness worsens.[985] It is uncertain to what extent acute systolic heart failure is mediated by myocarditis, cytokine storm, small vessel thrombotic complications, microvascular dysfunction, or a variant of stress-induced cardiomyopathy.[986] Myocardial injury has been reported in 20% of hospitalised patients. Factors associated with the development of myocardial injury include older age, male sex, and the presence of comorbidities.[987] Cardiac injury was associated with higher risk of mortality, intensive care unit admission, mechanical ventilation, and developing coagulopathy.[988] Cardiovascular complications have been reported in 14.1% of patients during hospitalisation, with an overall case fatality rate of 9.6%. Patients with pre-existing cardiovascular comorbidities or risk factors are at higher risk for cardiovascular complications and mortality. Complications include arrhythmias or palpitations (18.4%), myocardial injury (10.3%), angina (10.2%), acute myocardial infarction (3.5%), and acute heart failure (2%).[989] Cases of fulminant myocarditis, cardiac tamponade, cor pulmonale, takotsubo syndrome, and pericarditis have also been reported.[990] [991] [992] [993] [994] Elevated cardiac biomarkers and emerging arrhythmia are associated with the development of severe COVID-19 and the need for intensive care admission.[995] Prevalence of cardiac disease is high among patients who are severely or critically ill, and these patients usually require intensive care and have a poor prognosis and higher rate of in-hospital mortality. These patients are more likely to require non-invasive or invasive ventilation, and have a higher risk of thromboembolic events and septic shock compared with patients without a history of cardiac disease.[985] [996] [997] [998] [999]
Complications | Timeframe | Likelihood
---|---|---
Perform an ECG and order high-sensitivity troponin I (hs-cTnI) or T (hs-cTnT) and N-terminal pro-brain natriuretic peptide (NT-proBNP) levels in patients with symptoms or signs that suggest acute myocardial injury in order to make a diagnosis. Results should be considered in the clinical context.[1000]

Monitor blood pressure, heart rate, and fluid balance, and perform continuous ECG monitoring in all patients with suspected or confirmed acute myocardial injury.[1000]

There are limited data to recommend any specific drug treatments for these patients. Management should involve a multidisciplinary team including intensive care specialists, cardiologists, and infectious disease specialists.[986] It is important to consider that drugs such as hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin may prolong the QT interval and lead to arrhythmias.[1000] Guidelines for the management of COVID-19-related myocarditis are available.[1001]

Infection may have longer-term implications for overall cardiovascular health; however, further research is required.[1002] A study of 100 patients who had recently recovered from COVID-19 found that cardiovascular magnetic resonance imaging revealed ongoing myocardial inflammation in 60% of patients, independent of pre-existing conditions, severity and overall course of the acute illness, and time from the original diagnosis.[1003]

### Acute Kidney Injury

| acute kidney injury | variable | high |
---|---|---|
The pooled incidence of acute kidney injury is 10.6%, which is higher than the incidence in hospitalised patients without COVID-19. Patients with acute kidney injury have a significantly increased risk of in-hospital mortality (odds ratio of 11.05). The mortality rate and incidence in patients in China was significantly lower than those in patients outside of China. Risk factors include older age ≥60 years, male sex, and severe infection.[1004]

In a small UK cohort, 29% of hospitalised children met the diagnostic criteria for acute kidney injury, with most cases occurring in children admitted to the intensive care unit and in those with paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome.[1005]

Can develop at any time before or during hospital admission. Causes include haemodynamic changes, hypovolaemia, viral infection leading directly to kidney tubular injury, thrombotic vascular processes, glomerular pathology, or rhabdomyolysis.[702] Direct kidney infection has been confirmed in an autopsy study of a single patient.[1006]

Patients should meet criteria for acute kidney injury for diagnosis. [NHS England: acute kidney injury (AKI) algorithm] Perform a urinalysis for blood, protein, and glucose to help identify the underlying cause. Imaging is recommended if urinary tract obstruction is suspected.[702]

Stop any drugs that can cause or worsen acute kidney injury, if possible. Aim to achieve optimal fluid status (euvolaemia) in all patients. Consider a loop diuretic for treating fluid overload only. Manage hyperkalaemia according to local protocols. See local protocols for guidance on renal replacement therapy.[702]

Specialist input may be required in some cases (e.g., uncertainty about cause, abnormal urinalysis results, complex fluid management needs, indications for renal replacement therapy), and some patients may require critical care admission.[702] Continuous renal replacement therapy (CRRT) is recommended in critically ill patients with acute kidney injury who develop indications for renal replacement therapy; prolonged intermittent renal replacement therapy is recommended over haemodialysis if CRRT is not available or possible.[3]

Monitor fluid status daily, as well as serum urea, creatinine, and electrolytes at least every 48 hours (or more often if clinically indicated). Monitor patients for the development of, or progression to, chronic kidney disease for at least 2 to 3 years after acute kidney injury.[702]

Cases of nephritis and collapsing glomerulopathy have been reported.[1007] [1008]
### Complications

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<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>acute liver injury</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>medium</td>
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Liver injury may be associated with pre-existing liver disease, viral infection, drug toxicity, systemic inflammation, hypoxia, or haemodynamic issues; however, the underlying mechanism is unclear. The overall prevalence is 25%, although there is no uniform definition of liver injury in these patients and prevalence depends on the definition used in studies. The overall prevalence may be as low as 9% when strict criteria for diagnosis are used. The prevalence of elevated alanine aminotransferase and aspartate aminotransferase is 19% and 22%, respectively. The prevalence of hypertransaminasaemia is higher in patients with severe disease compared with patients with non-severe disease.\[1009\]

Risk factors associated with severe liver injury include older age, pre-existing liver disease, and severe COVID-19.\[1010\]

Medications used in the treatment of COVID-19 (e.g., lopinavir/ritonavir) may have a detrimental effect on liver injury.\[1010\]

Guidelines on the management of liver derangement in patients with COVID-19 have been published.\[1011\]

### Neurological complications

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<th>Condition</th>
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<tr>
<td>neurological complications</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>medium</td>
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Patients commonly have central or peripheral neurological complications, possibly due to viral invasion of the central nervous system, inflammatory response, or immune dysregulation.\[1012\]

Neurological manifestations have been reported in 4% to 57% of patients in large retrospective observational studies. Central nervous system manifestations were more common than peripheral nervous system manifestations.\[1012\] However, most studies included minor symptoms such as headache and dizziness, which are classified as symptoms of COVID-19 in this topic rather than complications. Neurological complications are rare in children.\[1013\]

Neurological complications include acute cerebrovascular disease, impairment of consciousness, ataxia, seizures, corticospinal tract signs, meningoencephalitis, encephalopathy, encephalomyelitis, peripheral demyelinating lesions, peripheral neuropathy, intracerebral haemorrhage, cerebral venous sinus thrombosis, myopathy, myasthenia gravis, Guillain-Barre syndrome and other neuropathies, and abnormal findings on brain magnetic resonance imaging.\[1012\] [1014]

Patients may present with these manifestations, or they may develop them during the course of the disease. Neurological complications tend to develop 1 to 2 weeks after the onset of respiratory disease.\[1015\]

Acute cerebrovascular disease (including ischaemic stroke, haemorrhagic stroke, cerebral venous thrombosis, and transient ischaemic attack) has been reported in 0.5% to 5.9% of patients. The most common type was ischaemic stroke (0.4% to 4.9%).\[1012\] Stroke is relatively frequent among hospitalised COVID-19 patients relative to other viral respiratory infections, and has a high risk of in-hospital mortality. Risk factors include older age and male sex. Median time from onset of COVID-19 symptoms to stroke was 8 days.\[1016\] [1017] Stroke presents later in severe disease, and earlier in mild to moderate disease.\[1018\] Ischaemic stroke appears to be more severe and result in worse outcomes (severe disability) in patients with COVID-19, with the median NIH Stroke Scale score being higher among those with COVID-19 compared with those without.\[1019\] Guidelines for the management of acute ischaemic stroke in patients with COVID-19 infection have been published.\[1020\]

Guillain-Barre syndrome has been reported. Both post-infectious and pre-infectious patterns have been reported.\[1012\] The mean age of patients was 55 years with a male predominance. Most patients had respiratory and/or severe symptoms of COVID-19, although it has also been reported in asymptomatic patients. A higher prevalence of the classic sensorimotor form and acute inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy have been reported, although rare variants have also been noted.\[1021\]
Patients with pre-existing neurological disorders may develop an exacerbation of their neurological symptoms and severe COVID-19.[1022]

Patients may show cerebral changes on magnetic resonance imaging months after recovery, suggesting that long-term consequences may be possible.[1023]

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<tr>
<th>Complications</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>post-COVID-19 syndrome (long COVID)</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Definition**: signs and symptoms that develop during or after an infection consistent with COVID-19, continue for more than 12 weeks, and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis. Ongoing symptomatic COVID-19 is defined as signs and symptoms from 4 weeks up to 12 weeks. The syndrome is not thought to be linked to disease severity or specific signs and symptoms during the acute phase of illness.[1024]

Protracted symptoms are common in many viral and bacterial infections.

**Epidemiology**: in a study in Italy, nearly 90% of hospitalised patients who recovered from COVID-19 reported persistence of at least one symptom 2 months after discharge. Only 12.6% of patients had no related symptoms, 32% had one or two symptoms, and 55% had three or more symptoms.[958] Another study in the UK found that nearly 75% of patients who are discharged from hospital remain symptomatic at 3 months.[1025] A study in China found that at 6 months after acute infection, the most common persistent symptoms were fatigue or muscle weakness (63%), sleep difficulties (26%), and anxiety or depression (23%). Patients who were more severely ill had more severe impaired pulmonary diffusion capacities.[1026] Prolonged illness can occur among young adults with no underlying comorbidities. In a survey study of symptomatic adults, 35% had not returned to their usual state of health 2 to 3 weeks after testing. Among those aged 18 to 34 years with no underlying chronic medical conditions, 20% had not returned to their usual state of health.[1027] The number of symptoms at follow-up was associated with the symptom load during the acute phase of infection and the number of comorbidities in non-hospitalised patients.[1028] Persistent symptoms have been reported in pregnant women and children, but appear to be less common in children compared with adults.[3] [1029]

**Diagnosis**: use a holistic, person-centred approach that includes a comprehensive clinical history (including history of suspected or confirmed acute COVID-19, nature and severity of previous and current symptoms, timing and duration of symptoms since the start of acute illness, and a history of other health conditions), and appropriate examination that involves assessing physical, cognitive, psychological, and psychiatric symptoms, as well as functional abilities. Refer patients with signs or symptoms that could be caused by an acute or life-threatening complication (e.g., severe hypoxaemia, signs of severe lung disease, cardiac chest pain, multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children) urgently to the relevant acute services.[1024]

**Signs and symptoms**: symptoms vary widely, may relapse and remit or fluctuate, can change unpredictably, and can occur in those with mild disease only. Common long-term symptoms include persistent cough, low-grade fever, breathlessness, fatigue, pain, chest pain/tightness, palpitations, myalgia, arthralgia, headaches, vision changes, hearing loss, earache, tinnitus, sore throat, loss of taste/smell, impaired mobility, numbness in extremities, dizziness, tremors, memory loss, mood changes, skin rashes, gastrointestinal symptoms, neurocognitive difficulties, sleep disturbances, delirium (older people), and mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression).[3] [804] [1024] Some of the symptoms may overlap with post-intensive care syndrome (see above). The inability to return to normal activities, emotional and mental health outcomes, and financial loss are common.[1030]

**Investigations**: tailor investigations to the clinical presentation, and to rule out any acute or life-threatening complications and alternative diagnoses. Investigations may include blood tests (e.g., full blood count, kidney and liver function tests, C-reactive protein, ferritin, thyroid function), oxygen saturation, blood pressure and heart rate measurements, exercise tolerance test, chest x-ray, electrocardiogram, and psychiatric assessment.[3] [804] [1024] Around 9% of patients had deteriorating chest x-ray appearances at follow-up, which may indicate lung fibrosis. Persistently elevated D-dimer and C-reactive protein have also been reported.[1031]

**Management**: give advice and information on self-management including ways to self-manage symptoms (e.g., set realistic goals, antipyretic for fever, breathing techniques for chronic cough, home
pulse oximetry for monitoring breathlessness, pulmonary rehabilitation, staged return to exercise); who
to contact if there is concern about symptoms or if there is need for support; sources of support (e.g.,
support groups, online forums); and how to get support from other services (e.g., social care, housing,
financial support). A personalised, multidisciplinary rehabilitation plan that covers physical, psychological,
and psychiatric aspects of rehabilitation is an important part of management. Many patients recover
spontaneously with holistic support, rest, symptomatic treatment, and a gradual increase in activity.
Referral to a specialist may be required in patients where there is clinical concern along with respiratory,
cardiac, or neurological symptoms that are new, persistent, or progressive.[804] [1024]

**Follow-up**: agree with the patient how often follow-up and monitoring are needed (either in person or
remotely), and which healthcare professionals should be involved. Take into account the patient’s level
of need and the services involved. Tailor monitoring to the patient’s symptoms, and consider supported
self-monitoring at home (e.g., heart rate, blood pressure, pulse oximetry). Be alert to symptoms that could
require referral or investigation.[1024]

[NICE COVID-19 rapid guideline: managing the long-term effects of COVID-19]

[BMJ webinar: long COVID – how to define it and how to manage it]
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Follow up

Complications

Post-acute COVID-19 appears to be a multi-system disease, sometimes occurring after a relatively mild acute illness. Clinical management requires a whole-patient perspective. This graphic summarises the assessment and initial management of patients with delayed recovery from an episode of COVID-19 that was managed in the community or in a standard hospital ward.

Managing comorbidities

Many patients have comorbidities including diabetes, hypertension, kidney disease or ischaemic heart disease. These need to be managed in conjunction with COVID-19 treatment. Refer to condition specific guidance, available in the associated article by Greenhalgh and colleagues.

Safety netting and referral

The patient should seek medical advice if concerned, for example:
- Worsening breathlessness
- PaO₂ < 95%
- Unexplained chest pain
- New confusion
- Focal weakness

Specialist referral may be indicated, based on clinical findings, for example:
- Respiratory if suspected pulmonary embolism, severe pneumonia
- Cardiology if suspected myocardial infection, pericarditis, myocarditis or new heart failure
- Neurology if suspected neurovascular or acute neurological event

Pulmonary rehabilitation may be indicated if patient has persistent breathlessness following recovery.

"Long covid" in primary care

Assessment and initial management of patients with continuing symptoms

Person with symptoms 3 or more weeks after COVID-19 onset

Clinical assessment

- Full history
- From date of first symptoms

- Clinical testing
  - if indicated

- Respiratory examination
- Pulse oximetry
- Functional status
- Heart rate and rhythm
- Blood pressure

Social and financial circumstances

- Social, financial, and cultural support

- Prolonged COVID-19 may limit the ability to engage in work and family activities. Patients may have experienced family bereavements as well as job losses and consequent financial stress and food poverty. See the associated article by Greenhalgh and colleagues for a list of external resources to help with these problems.

Medical management

Symptomatic, such as treating fever with paracetamol

- Optimize control of long term conditions
- Listening and empathy
- Give advice and support
- Consider antibiotics for secondary infection
- Treat specific complications as indicated

Self management

- Daily pulse oximetry
- Attention to general health
- Rest and relaxation
- Self pacing and gradual increase in exercise
- If tolerated
- Set achievable targets

Social, financial, and cultural support

- Social, financial, and cultural support

- In the consultation:
  - Continuity of care
  - Avoid inappropriate medication
  - Longer appointments for patients with complex needs (face to face if needed)

- In the community:
  - Community link worker
  - Patient peer support groups
  - Attached mental health support services
  - Cross sector partnerships with social care, community services, faith groups

"Long covid" in primary care

BMJ. 2020, 370:m3026

Cardiac arrest

Variable

Medium
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

In-hospital cardiac arrest is common in critically ill patients with COVID-19, and is associated with poor survival, particularly among older patients. Among 5019 critically ill patients with COVID-19, 14% had an in-hospital cardiac arrest. Risk factors included older age, male sex, presence of comorbidities, and admission to a hospital with a smaller number of intensive care unit beds. Approximately 57% of patients received cardiopulmonary resuscitation. The most common rhythms at the time of resuscitation were pulseless electrical activity (49.8%) and asystole (23.8%). Of those who received resuscitation, 12% survived to hospital discharge with most of these patients being younger than 45 years of age. [1032]

Cardiac arrest with COVID-19

BMJ. 2020;371:m3513

Reported in 4% to 8% of patients in case series. [45] [46] [517] [1033]
### Complications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complication</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disseminated intravascular coagulation</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute respiratory failure</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cytokine release syndrome</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
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</table>

#### Disseminated Intravascular Coagulation
Disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC) is a manifestation of coagulation failure, and an intermediate link in the development of multi-organ failure. Patients may be at high risk of bleeding/haemorrhage or venous thromboembolism.[1034] Reported in 71% of non-survivors.[1035]

Coagulopathy manifests as elevated fibrinogen, elevated D-dimer, and minimal change in prothrombin time, partial thromboplastin time, and platelet count in the early stages of infection. Increasing interleukin-6 levels correlate with increasing fibrinogen levels. Coagulopathy appears to be related to severity of illness and the resultant thromboinflammation. Monitor D-dimer level closely.[1036]

Anticoagulant therapy with a low molecular weight heparin or unfractionated heparin has been associated with a better prognosis in patients with severe COVID-19 who have a sepsis-induced coagulopathy (SIC) score of ≥4 or a markedly elevated D-dimer level.[1037] In patients with heparin-induced thrombocytopenia (or a history of it), argatroban or bivalirudin are recommended.[1034]

Standard guidance for the management of bleeding manifestations associated with DIC or septic coagulopathy should be followed if bleeding occurs; however, bleeding manifestations without other associated factors is rare.[1036] [635]

#### Acute Respiratory Failure
Reported in 8% of patients in case series.[46]

Leading cause of mortality in patients with COVID-19.[894]

Children can quickly progress to respiratory failure.[11]

#### Cytokine Release Syndrome
Cytokine release syndrome may cause ARDS or multiple-organ dysfunction, which may lead to death.[1038] Elevated serum proinflammatory cytokines (e.g., tumour necrosis factor alpha, interleukin-2, interleukin-6, interleukin-8, interleukin-10, granulocyte-colony stimulating factor, monocyte chemoattractant protein 1) and inflammatory markers (e.g., C-reactive protein, serum ferritin) have been commonly reported in patients with severe COVID-19. This likely represents a type of virus-induced secondary haemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis, which may be fatal.[45] [532] [564] [1039] Interleukin-6, in particular, has been associated with severe COVID-19 and increased mortality.[1040]

One study found that patients who require admission to the intensive care unit have significantly higher levels of interleukin-6, interleukin-10, and tumour necrosis factor alpha, and fewer CD4+ and CD8+ T cells.[1041]

However, the pooled mean serum interleukin-6 level was markedly less in patients with severe or critical COVID-19 compared with patients with other disorders associated with elevated cytokines such as cytokine release syndrome, sepsis, and non-COVID-19-related ARDS. These findings question the role of cytokine storm in COVID-19-induced organ dysfunction, and further research is required.[1042]
Cytokine release syndrome has been reported in children, although cases appear to be rare.[1043] See the section below on paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complications</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A rare, but severe condition, reported in children and adolescents approximately 2 to 4 weeks after the onset of COVID-19, likely due to a post-infectious inflammatory process. The syndrome has a strong temporal association with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infection.[1044] [1045] [1046] Also known as PIMS, multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome temporally associated with SARS-CoV-2 (PIMS-TS), as well as other variations.

The syndrome shares common features with Kawasaki disease and toxic shock syndrome, but case definitions vary.[407] [1046] [1047] [1048] Most patients have fever, as well as features of shock, cardiac involvement (e.g., elevated cardiac markers, congestive heart failure, cardiac dysfunction, myocarditis, coronary artery dilatation or aneurysm, hypotension, pericardial effusion, mitral regurgitation), gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g., abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea), and significantly elevated inflammatory markers.[1044] [1045] Additional clinical and laboratory characteristics including thrombocytopenia, fatigue, headache, myalgia, sore throat, and lymphadenopathy have been suggested to refine the case definition.[17] Mucocutaneous findings may be present, many of which overlap with Kawasaki disease.[1049]

Three types of clinical manifestations have been recognised: persistent fever and gastrointestinal symptoms (the most common type); shock with heart dysfunction; and symptoms coincident with the diagnostic criteria for Kawasaki disease.[1050]

A systematic review of 27 studies (913 cases) found that the median age of patients was 9.3 years of age, and 57% of patients were male. At least one comorbidity was reported in 31% of cases, most commonly obesity, asthma, and chronic lung disease. The most common manifestations were fever (99%), gastrointestinal symptoms (87%), and cardiovascular symptoms such as myocardial dysfunction (55%), coronary artery aneurysms (22%), and shock (66%). The pooled prevalence of respiratory symptoms was 41%, and neurological symptoms was 36%. Other symptoms included conjunctivitis (57%), rash (59%), and oral mucosal changes (42%). Inflammatory and cardiac markers were elevated in the majority of patients, and 38% had abnormal findings on chest x-ray. Approximately 79% of patients required intensive care admission, 63% required inotropic support, 57% required anticoagulation, and 33% required mechanical ventilation. The mortality rate was 1.9%.[1051]

In a multicentre observational study in the UK, 78 cases were reported across 21 paediatric intensive care units. The median age was 11 years and 67% were male. Children from minority ethnic backgrounds accounted for 78% of cases. Fever, shock, abdominal pain, vomiting, and diarrhoea were the common presenting features. Around 36% had evidence of coronary artery abnormalities. In terms of treatment, 46% required invasive ventilation and 83% required vasopressor support.[1052]

The most common cardiovascular complications include shock, cardiac arrhythmias, pericardial effusion, and coronary artery dilatation.[1053]

Management is mainly supportive and involves a multidisciplinary team (paediatric infectious disease, cardiology, rheumatology, critical care). Patients are commonly managed with intravenous immunoglobulin, vasopressor support, corticosteroids, immune modulators, anticoagulation, antiplatelet therapy, and respiratory support.[1044] [1045] A national consensus management pathway from the UK is available.[1054] The American College of Rheumatology has published guidelines on the diagnosis and management of MIS-C.[1055]

While an association between this syndrome and COVID-19 seems plausible based on current evidence, the association is not definitive and further research is required. It is not clear yet whether this syndrome is Kawasaki disease with SARS-CoV-2 as the triggering agent, or whether this is a different syndrome, although increasing evidence suggests that they are two separate syndromes. The syndrome appears to occur in children who have not manifested the early stages of COVID-19, but appears similar to the later
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complications</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>phase of COVID-19 in adults.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunologically, PIMS appears to be a distinct clinical entity from Kawasaki disease as neutrophilia and raised monocyte counts, features of Kawasaki disease, were not observed in one cohort.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coronaviruses disease (COVID-19)</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cases of COVID-19-associated Kawasaki-like multisystem inflammatory disease have been reported in adults.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy-related complications</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy outcome is usually good, although there are little data on exposure during early pregnancy. Risk factors for severe disease in pregnant women include pre-existing comorbidities (e.g., chronic hypertension, diabetes), high maternal age, and high body mass index. Pregnant women are more likely to need intensive care unit admission and invasive ventilation, especially those with a pre-existing comorbidity. Preterm birth is more common in pregnant women with COVID-19 compared with pregnant women without the disease. Caesarean delivery occurs in approximately 50% of cases, with the most common indication being severe maternal pneumonia or concern about sudden maternal decompensation. Perinatal deaths are rare, and occur in less than 1% of cases. Maternal morbidity is similar to that of women of reproductive age. Stillbirths have been reported. However, there is no evidence of an increase in stillbirths regionally or nationally during the pandemic in England when compared with the same months in the previous year and despite variable community infection rates in different regions.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited low-quality evidence suggests that the risk of infection in neonates is extremely low. Most infections are acquired in the postnatal period, although congenitally acquired infection has been reported. Unlike children who generally have asymptomatic infection, two-thirds of neonatal cases are symptomatic and a significant proportion require intensive care, although the overall prognosis appears to be excellent.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspergillosis</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invasive pulmonary aspergillosis has been reported in critically ill patients with moderate to severe ARDS. A prospective observational study found that one third of mechanically ventilated patients with COVID-19 had putative invasive pulmonary aspergillosis.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intubation for more than 7 days may be a risk factor. Other potential risk factors include older age, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, immunosuppression, critical illness, or use of high-dose corticosteroids. Consider aspergillosis in patients who deteriorate despite optimal supportive care or have other suspicious radiological or clinical features.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescribe appropriate antifungal therapy according to local guidelines. Guidance on the diagnosis and management of COVID-19-associated pulmonary aspergillosis has been published.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pancreatic injury</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild pancreatic injury (defined as elevated serum amylase or lipase levels) has been reported in 17% of patients in one case series. It is unknown whether this is a direct viral effect or due to the harmful immune response that occurs in some patients. Clinical acute pancreatitis has not been reported.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior history of pancreatitis does not appear to be a risk factor for pancreatic inflammation in patients with COVID-19.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autoimmune haemolytic anaemia</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warm or cold autoimmune haemolytic anaemia (first episode) has been reported in 7 patients after the onset of COVID-19 symptoms and within the timeframe compatible with cytokine release syndrome. Four patients had indolent B lymphoid malignancy. It is unknown whether the haemolytic anaemia is related to COVID-19 infection.</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Follow up

Complications | Timeframe | Likelihood
--- | --- | ---
immune thrombocytopenia | variable | low

Immune thrombocytopenia has been reported rarely. The majority of cases were in patients >50 years of age, with only 7% of cases reported in children. The majority of cases were in patients with moderate to severe COVID-19; however, 7% of cases were in asymptomatic COVID-19 patients. Onset occurred in 20% of cases 3 weeks after the onset of COVID-19 symptoms, with most cases reported after clinical recovery. Severe life-threatening bleeding was uncommon. Treatment involved the use of corticosteroids, intravenous immunoglobulin, and thrombopoietin-receptor agonists.[1073]

subacute thyroiditis | variable | low

Cases of subacute thyroiditis have been reported in patients with COVID-19 who require intensive care.[1074] The first known case of subacute thyroiditis was reported in an 18-year-old woman. Subacute thyroiditis is a thyroid disease of viral or post-viral origin.[1075]

gastrointestinal complications | variable | low

Critically ill patients may develop gastrointestinal complications; however, it is unclear whether this is a manifestation of critical illness in general, or whether it is specific to COVID-19. One study found that patients with COVID-19 were more likely to develop gastrointestinal complications compared with those without COVID-19, specifically transaminitis, severe ileus, and mesenteric ischaemia.[1076] Macrovascular arterial/venous thrombosis has been identified in almost 50% of patients with bowel ischaemia. Overall mortality in COVID-19 patients with gastrointestinal ischaemia and radiologically evident mesenteric thrombotic occlusion was 38.7% and 40%, retrospectively.[1077]

Prognosis

Mortality

The leading cause of death is respiratory failure from acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS).[894] The overall pooled mortality rate from ARDS in COVID-19 patients is 39%; however, this varies significantly between countries (e.g., China 69%, Iran 28%, France 19%, Germany 13%).[895] Risk factors for respiratory failure include older age, male sex, cardiovascular disease, laboratory markers (such as lactate dehydrogenase, lymphocyte count, and C-reactive protein), and high viral load on admission.[896]

People <65 years of age have a very small risk of death even in pandemic epicentres, and deaths in people <65 years of age without any underlying conditions is rare.[897]

Mortality rates have decreased over time despite stable patient characteristics. In one study among patients with critical illness admitted to an intensive care unit at an academic health system in the US, the mortality rate decreased from 43.5% to 19.2% over the study period.[898] In another study in the UK, adjusted in-hospital mortality decreased from 52.2% in the first week of March 2020 to 16.8% in the last week of May 2020.[899] This may reflect the impact of changes in hospital strategy and clinical processes, and better adherence to evidence-based standard of care therapies for critical illness over time, such as high-flow nasal oxygen to avert intubation, prone positioning, and decreased use of mechanical ventilation. Further studies are needed to confirm these results and investigate causal mechanisms.

Infection fatality rate (IFR)
Follow up

- Defined as the proportion of deaths among all infected individuals including confirmed cases, undiagnosed cases (e.g., asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic cases), and unreported cases. The IFR gives a more accurate picture of the lethality of a disease compared with the case fatality rate.
- Approximately 10% of the global population may have been infected by October 2020, with an estimated overall IFR of 0.15% to 0.2% (0.03% to 0.04% in those <70 years of age).[900] The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s current best estimate of the IFR, according to age (as of 10 September 2020):[135]
  - 0 to 19 years – 0.003%
  - 20 to 49 years – 0.02%
  - 50 to 69 years – 0.5%
  - ≥70 years – 5.4%.
- Based on these figures, the overall IFR for people <70 years of age is approximately 0.18%.
- The IFR can vary across locations. A meta-analysis reports the point estimate of the IFR to be 0.68% across populations, with high heterogeneity (as of July 2020). The rate varied across locations from 0.17% to 1.7%.[901]
  - Among people on board the Diamond Princess cruise ship, a unique situation where an accurate assessment of the IFR in a quarantined population can be made, the IFR was 0.85%. However, all deaths occurred in patients >70 years of age, and the rate in a younger, healthier population would be much lower.[902]
- These estimates have limitations and are likely to change as more data emerge over the course of the pandemic.

Seroprevalence studies

- Estimates of the IFR can be inferred from seroprevalence studies.
  - Worldwide seroprevalence estimates range between 0.37% and 22.1%, with a pooled estimate of 3.38% (based on data from 23 countries as of August 2020).[903]
  - UK: seroprevalence was 7.1% in the UK overall according to the first round of results of the UK Biobank COVID-19 antibody study. Previous infection was most common among people who lived in London (10.4%), and least common among those who lived in the south west of England and Scotland (4.4% in both).[904]
  - US: less than 10% of people are thought to have detectable severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) antibodies based on data from July to September 2020.[905] Current seroprevalence estimates for 10 sites in the US are available. [CDC: commercial laboratory seroprevalence survey data]
  - China: seroprevalence was 3.2% to 3.8% in Wuhan, and decreased in other Chinese cities as the distance to the epicenter increased.[906]
- These studies suggest that the prevalence of infections is much higher than the official case counts suggest, and therefore the virus is much less lethal than initially thought.

Case fatality rate (CFR)

- Defined as the total number of deaths reported divided by the total number of detected cases reported. CFR is subject to selection bias as more severe/hospitalised cases are likely to be tested.
- The World Health Organization’s current estimate of the global CFR is 2.2% (as of 14 February 2021).[907] This is much lower than the reported CFR of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS), which was 10%, and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), which was 37%.[45]
- CFR varies considerably between countries.
  - In China, the overall CFR has been reported to be between 1.4% and 2.3% (0.9% in patients without comorbidities).[4] [908]
• CFR increases with age.
  - In the US, the majority of deaths were in patients aged ≥65 years. The CFR was highest among patients aged ≥85 years (10% to 27%), followed by those aged 65 to 84 years (3% to 11%), then those aged 55 to 64 years (1% to 3%), and finally those aged 20 to 54 years (<1%).[7]
  - In China, the majority of deaths were in patients aged ≥60 years.[4] The CFR was highest among patients aged ≥80 years (13.4%), followed by those aged 60 to 79 years (6.4%), and then those aged <60 years (0.32%).[908]
  - In Italy, the CFR was highest among patients aged ≥80 years (52.5%), followed by those aged 70 to 79 years (35.5%), and then those aged 60 to 69 years (8.5%).[909]
  - Deaths are rare in children.[7] [21] In one study, 70% of deaths occurred in those aged 10 to 20 years, 20% in those aged 1 to 9 years, and 10% in children under 1 year of age.[910]
• CFR increases with the presence of comorbidities.
  - In China, the majority of deaths were in patients who had pre-existing underlying health conditions (10.5% for cardiovascular disease, 7.3% for diabetes, 6.3% for chronic respiratory disease, 6% for hypertension, and 5.6% for cancer).[4]
• CFR increases with disease severity.
  - The CFR is highest in patients with critical disease, ranging from 26% to 67% in studies.[4] [911] [912]

Limitations of IFR/CFR

• Estimating the IFR and CFR in the early stages of a pandemic is subject to considerable uncertainties and estimates are likely to change as more data emerges. Rates tend to be high at the start of a pandemic and then trend downwards as more data becomes available.[913]
• There is currently no set case definition of a confirmed case, and case definitions vary. A positive polymerase chain reaction (PCR) result is sometimes the only criterion for a case to be recognised; however, a positive PCR test does not necessarily equal a diagnosis of COVID-19, or mean that a person is infected or infectious.[914] [915]
• The number of deaths reported on a particular day may not accurately reflect the number of deaths from the previous day due to delays associated with reporting deaths. This makes it difficult to know whether deaths are falling over time in the short term.[916]
• Patients who die ‘with’ COVID-19 and patients who die ‘from’ COVID-19 may be counted towards the death toll in some countries. For example, in Italy only 12% of death certificates reported direct causality from COVID-19, while 88% of patients who died had at least one comorbidity.[913] [917]

Mortality rate by country

• Mortality rates decreased sharply in the US over the first 6 months of the pandemic.[918]
• The number of deaths (per 100,000 population) for different countries varies:[919]
  - South Korea – 0.7
  - Japan – 1.2
  - Australia – 3.3
  - Germany – 11.3
  - Canada – 24.6
  - France – 46.6
  - Sweden – 57.4
  - Italy – 59.1
  - US – 60.3
  - UK – 62.6
  - Spain – 65.0
Prognostic factors

Prognostic factors that have been associated with increased risk of severe disease and mortality include:[920]

- Increasing age
- Male sex
- Smoking
- Presence of comorbidities (e.g., hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular or cerebrovascular disease, arrhythmias, COPD, dementia, malignancy)
- Dyspnoea
- Tachypnoea
- Hypoxaemia
- Respiratory failure
- Hypotension
- Tachycardia
- Lymphopenia
- Leukocytosis
- Neutrophilia
- Thrombocytopenia
- Hypoalbuminaemia
- Liver, kidney impairment, or cardiac injury
- Elevated inflammatory markers (C-reactive protein, procalcitonin, erythrocyte sedimentation rate)
- Elevated lactate dehydrogenase
- Elevated creatine kinase
- Elevated cardiac markers
- Elevated D-dimer
- Elevated interleukin-6
- Consolidative infiltrate or pleural effusion on chest imaging
- High sequential organ failure assessment (SOFA) score.

The most common underlying diseases in deceased patients were hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.[921]

A ratio of arterial partial pressure of oxygen to fraction of inspired oxygen (PaO₂/FiO₂) ≤200 mmHg and respiratory failure at admission are also independently associated with an increased risk of in-hospital mortality.[922] Almost half of patients who received invasive mechanical ventilation died. The mortality rate was higher in older patients >80 years (84%) compared with younger patients ≤40 years (48%).[923]

Hospital readmission

Approximately 9% of over 106,000 patients were readmitted to the same hospital within 2 months of discharge from the initial hospitalisation. Multiple readmissions occurred in 1.6% of patients. The median time from discharge to the first readmission was 8 days. Less than 0.1% of patients died during readmission. Risk factors for readmission include:[924]

- Age ≥65 years
- Presence of chronic conditions (COPD, heart failure, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, obesity)
- Hospitalisation within the 3 months preceding the first COVID-19 hospitalisation
Reinfection

There is limited information about reinfection. Recurrent RT-PCR positivity in patients 1 to 60 days after recovery ranges between 7% to 23% in studies, with an estimated pooled rate of 12%.[925] Patients with longer initial illness and younger age were more likely to experience recurrent RT-PCR positivity, while those with severe disease, diabetes, and a low lymphocyte count were less likely.[926] It is currently unclear whether this is due to reinfection; whether it is due to factors such as the type of specimen collection and technical errors associated with swab testing, infection by mutated SARS-CoV-2, or persistent viral shedding; or whether the test result was a false-negative at the time of discharge.[927]

Studies have repeatedly reported positive RT-PCR tests for up to 90 days after initial infection; therefore, it is most likely that these cases are actually protracted initial infections. It is important to note that although persistent viral shedding has been reported for up to 90 days after the onset of infection, replication-competent virus has not been identified 10 to 20 days after the onset of symptoms (depending on disease severity).[928] A cohort study of 200 patients with past infection found that despite persistent pharyngeal RT-PCR positivity for up to 90 days after recovery, transmission to close contacts was not observed, indicating that these patients are not contagious at the post-symptomatic stage of infection.[929]

True cases of reinfection (defined as two episodes of infection at least 3 months apart by virus strains with different genomic sequences) have been reported in Hong Kong, India, Ecuador, and Belgium.[930] Two possible cases of reinfection have also been reported in the US; however, while different genomic variants were responsible for the two episodes in both men, the infections occurred less than 2 months apart.[934] [935]

Cases of reinfection with SARS-CoV-2 variants have been reported in Brazil, the UK, and South Africa.[936] [937] [938] [939]

Immunity

The immune response, including duration of immunity, is not yet fully understood. There is evidence that suggests that infection with SARS-CoV-2 is likely to confer protective immunity against reinfection.[481] [940] [941] [942] [943] However, studies are of variable quality and comparison of findings is difficult.[944] A Public Health England study found that naturally acquired immunity, as a result of past infection, provides 83% protection against reinfection compared with people who have not had the disease previously. Protection appears to last for at least 5 months.[945]

Emerging studies suggest that the majority of people develop a strong and broad T-cell response with both CD4+ and CD8+ T cells, and some have a memory phenotype.[946] A preprint study found that spike immunoglobulin G (IgG) was relatively stable over 6 months, spike-specific memory B cells were more abundant at 6 months than at 1 month, and CD4+ and CD8+ T cells declined with a half-life of 3 to 5 months in adults (mostly with mild disease) who recovered from COVID-19.[947] Another study in over 12,000 healthcare workers found that prior SARS-CoV-2 infection that generated antibody responses offered protection from reinfection for most people in the 6 months following infection.[948] This bodes well for potential longer-term immunity.

The immune response to SARS-CoV-2 involves both cell-mediated immunity and antibody production. Adaptive immunity to SARS-CoV-2 is thought to occur within the first 7 to 10 days of infection. A robust memory B-cell and plasmablast response is detected early in infection, with secretion of IgA and IgM antibodies by day 5 to 7, and IgG by day 7 to 10 from the onset of symptoms. IgA and IgM titres decline after approximately 28 days, and IgG titres peak at approximately 49 days. T cells are simultaneously activated in the first week of infection and SARS-CoV-2-specific memory CD4+ and CD8+ T cells peak within 2 weeks, but remain detectable for ≥100 days. Antibody and T-cell responses differ among individuals, and depend on age and disease severity. Preprint studies have found that T-cell response is likely to be present in most adults at least 6 to 8 months after primary infection.[949] [950]

While there have been concerns about early declining IgG neutralising antibodies during convalescence, this is not thought to be an issue, because antibody levels always decline after the acute phase of an infection, and it is the levels of antibody titres after an infection that is important as this represents the generation of
long-lived plasma cells to protect against subsequent infection.[949] Antibodies have been detected up to 8 months after infection.[951]

Analysis of a large cohort of convalescent serum donors in New York City suggests that 99.5% of patients with confirmed mild disease seroconvert 4 weeks after illness. IgG antibodies developed over a period of 7 to 50 days from symptom onset, and 5 to 49 days from symptom resolution. This suggests that people with mild disease may have the ability to develop immunity.[952] However, among patients who recovered from mild disease in China, neutralising antibody titres varied substantially.[953] There are data to suggest that asymptomatic people may have a weaker immune response to infection; however, this is yet to be confirmed.[954]

Testing of blood samples taken before the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that some people already have immune cells that recognise SARS-CoV-2. Studies have reported T-cell reactivity against SARS-CoV-2 in 20% to 50% of people with no known exposure to the virus.[955] Approximately 5% of uninfected adults and 62% of uninfected children aged 6 to 16 years had antibodies that recognise SARS-CoV-2 in one study.[956] This may be a consequence of true immune memory derived in part from previous infection with common cold coronaviruses, or from other unknown animal coronaviruses. However, further research into whether there is pre-existing immunity to SARS-CoV-2 in the human population is required.

Maternal IgG antibodies to SARS-CoV-2 have been found to transfer across the placenta after asymptomatic or symptomatic infection in pregnancy.[957]
# Diagnostic guidelines

## Europe

**COVID-19: guidance for health professionals**  
**Published by:** Public Health England  
**Last published:** 2021

**COVID-19 pandemic**  
**Published by:** European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control  
**Last published:** 2021

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*Last published:* 2020

**Diagnosis and clinical management of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infection**

*Published by:* Peking Union Medical College Hospital  
*Last published:* 2020
# Treatment guidelines

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<td>COVID-19 rapid guideline: critical care in adults</td>
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<td>COVID-19: information for the respiratory community</td>
<td>British Thoracic Society</td>
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<td>Coronavirus specialty guides</td>
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<tr>
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**Last published:** 2021

### COVID-19 guidance and the latest research in the Americas
**Published by:** Pan American Health Organization  
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### Mask use in the context of COVID-19: interim guidance
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### Rapid advice guidelines for management of children with COVID-19
**Published by:** International multidisciplinary working group  
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### ISTH interim guidance on recognition and management of coagulopathy in COVID-19
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**Last published:** 2020

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**Last published:** 2020
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- **Last published:** 2021

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- **Last published:** 2020

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- **Published by:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- **Last published:** 2020

### Interim U.S. guidance for risk assessment and work restrictions for healthcare personnel with potential exposure to COVID-19
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<td>Evaluation and management considerations for neonates at risk for COVID-19</td>
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  **Last published:** 2021

#### Coronavirus disease
- **Published by:** Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention  
  **Last published:** 2021

#### New coronavirus infectious disease (COVID-19) related information page
- **Published by:** National Institute of Infectious Diseases Japan  
  **Last published:** 2021

#### COVID-19 infection
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  **Last published:** 2021

#### Management of critically ill patients with COVID-19 in ICU: statement from front-line intensive care experts in Wuhan, China
- **Published by:** Chinese expert working panel  
  **Last published:** 2020

#### Handbook of COVID-19 prevention and treatment
- **Published by:** First Affiliated Hospital, Zhejiang University School of Medicine  
  **Last published:** 2020

#### Diagnosis and treatment protocol for novel coronavirus pneumonia (trial version 7)
- **Published by:** National Health Commission of the People’s Republic of China; National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine of the People’s Republic of China  
  **Last published:** 2020

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- **Published by:** Peking Union Medical College Hospital  
  **Last published:** 2020

### Oceania

#### Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)
- **Published by:** Department of Health Australia  
  **Last published:** 2021
### Online resources

1. **Diagnosis** *(external link)*


3. Johns Hopkins University: coronavirus COVID-19 global cases *(external link)*

4. BMJ talk medicine: BMJ Best Practice podcast *(external link)*

5. BMJ talk medicine: the BMJ podcast *(external link)*

6. BMJ Best Practice: Management of co-existing conditions in the context of COVID-19 *(external link)*

7. WHO: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) dashboard *(external link)*

8. CDC: COVID data tracker weekly review *(external link)*


10. UK Department of Health and Social Care: REACT-1 studies – monthly results *(external link)*

11. GenBank *(external link)*

12. COG-UK: data *(external link)*


14. Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System *(external link)*

15. WHO: draft landscape of COVID-19 candidate vaccines *(external link)*

16. Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine *(external link)*

17. Moderna COVID-19 vaccine *(external link)*

18. AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine *(external link)*

19. WHO: infection prevention and control during health care when coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is suspected or confirmed *(external link)*

20. CDC: interim infection prevention and control recommendations for healthcare personnel during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic *(external link)*


22. BMJ: covid-19 in primary care (UK) *(external link)*
<p>| 23. | BMJ: covid-19 – a remote assessment in primary care (external link) |
| 25. | WHO: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public (external link) |
| 26. | Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine: what is the evidence to support the 2-metre social distancing rule to reduce COVID-19 transmission? (external link) |
| 27. | BMJ: facemasks for the prevention of infection in healthcare and community settings (external link) |
| 29. | Public Health England: guidance on shielding and protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable from COVID-19 (external link) |
| 30. | Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health: COVID-19 – guidance on clinically extremely vulnerable children and young people (external link) |
| 32. | Emerging (external link) |
| 33. | Complications (external link) |
| 34. | Criteria (external link) |
| 35. | Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine: are you infectious if you have a positive PCR test result for COVID-19? (external link) |
| 36. | BMJ Practice Pointer: interpreting a covid-19 tests result (external link) |
| 37. | BMJ practice pointer: testing for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies (external link) |
| 38. | BSTI: radiology decision tool for suspected COVID-19 (external link) |
| 39. | BSTI: lung ultrasound (LUS) for COVID-19 patients in critical care areas (external link) |
| 40. | British Association of Dermatologists: Covid-19 skin patterns (external link) |
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| 42. | CDC: coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) 2020 interim case definition (external link) |
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<td>ACOG: outpatient assessment and management for pregnant women with suspected or confirmed novel coronavirus (COVID-19)</td>
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<td>BMJ rapid recommendations: a living WHO guideline on drugs for COVID-19</td>
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<td>NICE COVID-19 rapid guideline: managing the long-term effects of COVID-19</td>
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<td>Public Health England: how to make a cloth face covering</td>
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<td>Government of Canada: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) – travel restrictions, exemptions, and advice (external link)</td>
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<td>NHS England: COVID-19 patient rehabilitation booklet (external link)</td>
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Figure 1: Number of COVID-19 cases reported weekly by WHO Region, and global deaths, as of 14 February 2021

World Health Organization
Figure 2: Illustration revealing ultrastructural morphology exhibited by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) when viewed with electron microscopically

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Figure 3: Virus replication cycle

*BMJ. 2020;371:m3862*
Figure 4: Transverse CT scans from a 32-year-old man, showing ground-glass opacity and consolidation of lower lobe of right lung near the pleura on day 1 after symptom onset (top panel), and bilateral ground-glass opacity and consolidation on day 7 after symptom onset.
Figure 5: Recommendations and evidence for the use of corticosteroids in hospitalised patients with COVID-19

**Recommendation 1**

**Usual supportive care**

**Strong**  
Patients with severe and critical COVID-19

**Corticosteroids**

**Weak**  
We recommend corticosteroids

**Recommendation 2**

**Usual supportive care**

**Strong**  
Patients with non-severe COVID-19

**Corticosteroids**

**Weak**  
We suggest no corticosteroids

**Evidence profile**

- Favors usual supportive care
- No important difference
- Favors corticosteroids

**Events per 1000 people**

- Mortality with non-severe illness: 176 fewer than usual care

**Evidence quality**

- Low

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Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Figure 6: Recommendations and evidence for the use of remdesivir in hospitalised patients with COVID-19

BMJ. 2020;370:m3379
Figure 7: “Long covid” in primary care

BMJ. 2020;370:m3026
Figure 8: Cardiac arrest with COVID-19

BMJ. 2020;371:m3513
Figure 9: Suggested return to physical activity after COVID-19: risk stratification to exclude features suggestive of myocarditis or post-acute COVID-19 and phased resumption of physical activity after 7 days without symptoms

BMJ. 2021;372:m4721
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