Mild COVID-19 Disease: Literature Review as of September 29, 2020
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The majority of diagnosed COVID-19 cases are considered mild. While the definition of mild differs from study to study, there are reports of lasting effects from having COVID-19 even among those with a mild diagnosis. This review will explore the symptomology of mild COVID-19 and the differing definitions, as well as try to shed light on possible long-term effects.

Definition of Mild COVID-19

The definition of mild COVID-19 can sometimes vary by study, making it difficult to pool all results together. The WHO considers a mild COVID-19 infection to be defined by “uncomplicated symptoms” that is further categorized as those with and without mild pneumonia.1 While the Chinese definition for a mild case includes “mild symptoms with no pneumonia in imaging”, and they further define a common type case as having fever, respiratory tract and other symptoms with pneumonia in imaging.2 The CDC classifies cases as mild for those who have “mild symptoms up to pneumonia”.3 So while the definition differs between health agencies, mainly a mild COVID-19 diagnosis will include upper respiratory tract symptoms with no or minor pneumonia in imaging.

Prevalence of Mild COVID-19

The majority of COVID-19 cases are considered to be mild cases. In a study of over 44,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases, more than 80% were classified as a mild case.4 Many other small studies confirm this with a majority of confirmed COVID-19 cases being of mild severity. Because many cases with mild COVID-19 present little to no symptoms, many may not actually be tested or present to healthcare locations. Therefore, the prevalence of mild COVID-19 is more than likely a conservative estimate and we can expect more mild cases than what is actually reported.5

More work has been done on risk factors for progression beyond mild COVID-19. Multiple studies have found that obesity, older age, male sex, hypertension, diabetes, and coronary artery disease increase the odds of progressing to a more severe COVID-19 diagnosis.6–8

Symptomology of Mild COVID-19

Mild COVID-19 is characterized by the typical symptoms described throughout scientific articles. The highest reported symptom among mild cases of COVID-19 is fever, with many also reporting fatigue, cough, headache, and loss of taste and/or smell.1,9–13 Those with a mild diagnosis, can show signs of pneumonia, but when compared to severe and critical cases have much less abnormalities shown on CT scans of the lungs.9–11 While there is no treatment for mild COVID-19, these symptoms are generally managed with typical care.
Lasting Effects

Even among mild cases, many anecdotal stories exist of lasting effects from COVID-19. Although, little research has been done on large samples of those who were diagnosed with COVID-19. One survey from the Netherlands of 1600 COVID-19 patients, where 91% reported no hospital stay, found that after 3 months from having the disease, 88% still reported fatigue, 40% reported headaches, and 29% reported dizziness (https://www.biomax.com/lib/press-releases/Initial-Result-Announcement_English.pdf).

While COVID-19 may have a high recovery rate, especially among younger populations, recovering from a diagnosis does not necessarily imply recovering from all symptoms. The spectrum of symptoms for mild COVID-19 vary widely and may last for weeks or months “post-disease”.


