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-Announcment_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".

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