

# ASYMPTOMATIC PEOPLE POSE A MAJOR RISK

Almost half of people with COVID-19 have no symptoms.

People who get the cold or flu typically show signs of having it: fever, fatigue, potentially shortness of breath, and others. A new study co-authored by Dr. Eric Topol and behavioral scientist Daniel Oran<sup>1</sup> collected data from 16 groups of COVID-19 patients and found that almost half (40-45%) of people who contract the SARS-CoV-2 virus are asymptomatic. They are often called the "silent spreaders," as they transmit the disease to others unknowingly.

The cohorts studied included nursing home residents in Washington, Diamond Princess cruise ship passengers, and university students and employees who were tested for COVID-19. The study, published in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, found that the number of asymptomatic people is much higher than initially believed and may be a key contributor to the spread of COVID-19.

The concern with the asymptomatic population, as Topol highlighted, is that "the virus might have greater potential than previously estimated to spread silently and deeply through human populations." As other studies have also shown, COVID-19 has a higher percentage of asymptomatic people than a typical flu, and the window for transmitting the virus is longer as well: "perhaps longer than 14 days."

Table 1 shows the study’s findings about the COVID-19 asymptomatic population, ranging from 40% to 45% on average.

The authors also reviewed a nursing home where “More than half of residents with positive test results were asymptomatic at the time of testing and most likely contributed to transmission.” The authors concluded, "The early data that we have assembled on the prevalence of asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2 infection suggest that this is a significant factor in the rapid progression of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Table 1 COVID-19 asymptomatic population.

SARS-CoV-2 testing studies	Tested	n	%
Iceland residents	13,080	43	43.0%
Italy residents	5,155	43	42.2%
Diamond Princess cruise ship	3,711	331	46.5%
Boston homeless shelter occupants	408	129	87.8%
NYC obstetrical patients	214	29	87.9%
USS Theodore Roosevelt ship	4,954	~500	58.4%
Japan citizens (Wuhan)	565	4	30.8%
Greek citizens (evacuated)	783	35	87.5%
Charles de Gaulle ship	1,760	~500	47.8%
Los Angeles homeless shelter	178	27	62.8%
King County nursing home	76	3	6.3%
Prision inmates	4,693	3,146	96.0%
Rutgers University students and	829	27	65.9%
Indiana residents	4,611	35	44.8%
Argentene cruise ship	217	104	81.3%
Francisco residents	4,160	39	52.7%
Author average			40-45%

This study is not alone. The CIDRAP<sup>2</sup> study found the COVID-19 asymptomatic populations to be 25%, compared to 16% for the typical flu, and a recent study from Italy, showed that 44% of laboratory-confirmed cases lacked symptoms<sup>3</sup>. As a result of this work, several recent studies have also highlighted increased use of asymptomatic screening: “Even without individuals ever developing symptoms, aggressive testing/screening of asymptomatic patients has been considered.”<sup>4</sup> The general public is also turning to screening. During a June 26 White House Coronavirus Task Force Briefing<sup>5</sup>, Dr. Anthony Fauci noted that the previous model of testing only symptomatic people was not working and that “a substantial proportion of the people that are getting infected do not know they're infected, they're not symptomatic, they're asymptomatic individuals.” He then urged millennials to get

tested, even if they are asymptomatic. The key in managing the pandemic is to include the asymptomatic people in testing.

**The focus of testing programs for SARS-CoV-2 should be substantially broadened to include persons who do not have symptoms of COVID-19.**

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3. European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). Novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic: increased transmission in the EU/EEA and the UK – sixth update. Stockholm, Sweden. 2020.
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5. White House Coronavirus Task Force briefing [Internet]. PBS NewsHour. 2020 [cited 2020 Jul 11]. Available from: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/watch-live-white-house-coronavirus-task-force-holds-first-briefing-in-two-months>