Communicable Diseases Intelligence
ISSN: 2209-6051 Online

This journal is indexed by Index Medicus and Medline.

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Communicable Diseases Network Australia

Communicable Diseases Intelligence (CDI) is a peer-reviewed scientific journal published by the Office of Health Protection, Department of Health. The journal aims to disseminate information on the epidemiology, surveillance, prevention and control of communicable diseases of relevance to Australia.

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Technical supplement

COVID-19 Australia: Epidemiology reporting

Last updated 9 April 2021

COVID-19 National Incident Room Surveillance Team

Summary

This supplement to the series of regular Australian coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemiological reports describes the technical background to the surveillance data reported through Communicable Diseases Network Australia (CDNA) as part of the nationally-coordinated response to COVID-19.

Background

Coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19), caused by the novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was first identified in humans in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The disease subsequently spread rapidly, leading to a global pandemic.\(^1\) The predominant modes of transmission for COVID-19 are through direct or close contact with an infected person via respiratory droplets, or indirectly via contact with contaminated fomites.\(^2\) The median incubation period of COVID-19 is 5–6 days, ranging from 1 to 14 days.\(^3,4\) The infectious period remains uncertain; however, it is estimated to be from 48 hours before symptoms develop until two weeks after symptom onset.\(^3,5\) The predominant symptoms reported in COVID-19 cases are cough, sore throat, fatigue, runny nose and fever.\(^6\) The majority of cases recover from the disease without clinical intervention; however, approximately 20% of global cases result in more severe outcomes, such as shortness of breath and pneumonia, necessitating hospitalisation and the requirement of additional oxygen or ventilation.\(^7,8\) Severe or fatal outcomes are generally more common among elderly cases or those with comorbid conditions.\(^8\) A visual depiction of the severity spectrum of COVID-19, and of the data sources that we use in this report to measure aspects of severity, is provided in Figure 1.

Data sources

Notifications to health departments

The majority of data presented in the latest fortnightly report were derived from the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (NNDSS). COVID-19 is a notifiable disease under public health legislation in all states and territories and is listed on the National Notifiable Diseases List under the National Health Security Act (2007).\(^9\) Accordingly, all jurisdictions report confirmed and probable cases of COVID-19 through the NNDSS. The national case definition for surveillance is available in the COVID-19 Series of National Guidelines.\(^10\) Due to the dynamic nature of the NNDSS, numbers presented in the latest fortnightly report may be subject to revision and may vary from numbers previously reported and from case notifications released by states and territories. Case numbers for the most recent dates of illness onset may be subject to revision, due to reporting delays. Data for the latest fortnightly report, unless otherwise indicated, have been extracted from the NNDSS within 48 hours after the end of the reporting period, for notifications received up to the end of the reporting period. Data for COVID-19 deaths notified in the latest reporting period were extracted from daily notifications from state and territory health departments to the National Incident Room (NIR), received up to the end of the reporting period.
Figure 1: Severity spectrum of COVID-19 cases and data sources used to measure severity in Australia

Acute respiratory illness

We report data from surveillance systems that monitor trends in the number of people reporting symptoms of mild respiratory illnesses in the community and in primary care settings. These systems gathered information from across Australia and include the online FluTracking syndromic surveillance system, the Commonwealth General Practice (GP) Respiratory Clinics, and the Australian Sentinel Practice Research Network (ASPREN) and Victorian Sentinel Practice Influenza Network (VicSPIN) GP sentinel surveillance systems. These systems capture data on any respiratory illness experienced by participants, including pathogens such as SARS-CoV-2.

Hospitalisations

To report on COVID-19 disease severity, we draw on hospitalisations and intensive care unit (ICU) admissions data provided from two sentinel surveillance systems: the Influenza Complications Alert Network (FluCAN) and the Short Period Incidence Study of Severe Acute Respiratory Infection Study (SPRINT-SARI). FluCAN is a real-time hospital sentinel surveillance system for acute respiratory disease requiring hospitalisation. Established to monitor for seasonal influenza, FluCAN has been modified to include surveillance for COVID-19. Participating sites collect detailed clinical and laboratory information from all hospitalised patients with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19. SPRINT-SARI is a sentinel system that collects detailed data on the characteristics and outcomes of and interventions for patients admitted to ICUs or High Dependency Units (HDUs) with COVID-19 at participating sites across Australia. Data presented from both sentinel surveillance systems may be subject to retrospective adjustments following publication. Data on severity is presented in the report each four weeks, rather than on a fortnightly basis.

Viral genomics

From Report 36 onwards, information on viral genomics is included in every second report. This information is provided by the National Analysis Team of the national pathogen genomic
sequence and analysis platform, AusTrakka,\(^i\) and from jurisdictional pathogen sequencing laboratories. Reporting periods are based on sample collection date.

Not all samples will be suitable for sequencing, especially those samples with low amounts of viral nucleic acid (i.e., high RT-qPCR cycle thresholds), or those subjected to storage at suboptimal conditions (causing RNA degradation). Quality control for consensus sequences included: requiring > 75% of the viral genome recovered; < 42 single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) from the MN9008947.3 reference genome; and < 100 ambiguous or missing bases. Sequences with 50–75% genome recovery are assessed for potential inclusion.

Report 35 and earlier used data from the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID), an international virus sequence database that provides open access to SARS-CoV-2 genomic data.\(^{14}\)

SARS-CoV-2 genomic lineages are defined using the Phylogenetic Assignment of Named Global Outbreak (PANGO) lineage nomenclature.\(^{15}\) Lineages reflect evolutionary relationships and are hierarchically organised following the phylogenetic tree structure. The PANGO designation describes major lineages with letters of the alphabet (A, B, etc.), with sub- and sub-sub-lineages numbered and separated by dots (‘.’). Thus, sub-lineage B.1.1 is contained with sub-lineage B.1, which is itself part of lineage B. The numbers at the same level are not indicative of a phylogenetic relationship. As such, B.1.1 is not necessarily more closely related to B.1.2 than to B.1.5. However, all the sub-lineages under B.1 are closer to each other than they are to B.2, for example. Only three sub-levels are permitted under this nomenclature system and sub-lineages under this will be assigned the next available alpha symbol (e.g. B.1.1.25.1 was reassigned to D.2 and B.1.1.28.1 was reassigned to P.1).

Lineage classifications can change retrospectively as new sequences are added and lineages diversify over time.\(^{11}\) Sequences that have been assigned higher-level lineage designations (e.g. B or B.1), where there are sub-lineages defined within the dataset (e.g. B.1.1, B.1.23 or B.1.1.25), may indicate a poor quality sequence; for example, a lower proportion of the genome recovered. Poor sequence quality can lead to uncertainty about the placement of the sequence into sub-lineages.

A “variant” refers to a set of viruses with the same or similar patterns of mutations, some of which are associated with increased transmissibility or virulence, or decreased effectiveness of public health measures. These are labelled as “variants of concern” (VOCs) and given specific identifiers (e.g. VOC-202012/01). However, as VOCs are usually defined not just by the unique set of mutations, but by membership of distinct lineage groups, they are often referred to by the lineage name. So VOC-202012/01 is often just referred to as B.1.1.7. It should be noted, though, that the lineage naming convention refers to evolutionary aspects of the virus, while the VOC-ID also takes into account the epidemiological behaviour of the virus. Here we refer to the VOCs by their lineage, B.1.1.7 (VOC-202012/01), B.1.351 (VOC-20201202/02) and P.1 (VOC-202101/02).

**B.1.1.7 (VOC-202012/01)**

The B.1.1.7 lineage is characterised by 17 mutations, including spike protein mutations N501Y and P681H, and a two-amino-acid deletion of residues 69,70 (IHV68I).\(^{16}\) Having first emerged in the United Kingdom in September 2020, where it has become the dominant strain and displaced other strains, it has now been detected in more than 90 countries worldwide.

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\(^{ii}\) Additional detailed information on SARS-CoV-2 lineages can be found at https://cov-lineages.org/descriptions.html.
B.1.351 (501Y.V2)

The B.1.351 lineage is characterised by nine characteristic mutations, including spike protein mutations K417N, E484K and N501Y. In addition to potentially increased transmissibility, there is concern that the E484K mutation may affect antibody-mediated neutralisation of the virus. This variant was first detected in South Africa in October 2020 and has since been documented in more than 40 countries, including becoming the dominant variant in Zambia.

P.1 (501Y.V3)

The most recently emerging VOC is P.1, a sub-cluster within lineage B.1.1.28 that is characterised by 17 mutations, including the same spike protein mutations K417T, E484K and N501Y as B.1.351. The B.1.1.28 lineage was common to Brazil, but in December 2020 reports emerged from Brazil’s Amazonas region of a surge in cases associated with the P.1 lineage. In late December, the P.1 variant was reported in four COVID-19 cases in Japan detected during airport screening, and has now been seen in more than 20 countries.

Testing data

Testing data by demographic breakdown were reported on a weekly basis by jurisdictions.

Denominators

Population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Estimated Resident Population (as at 30 December 2019) were used to estimate rates of infection by jurisdiction, age group, sex and Indigenous status.

International

All data reported in the international section were extracted from the World Health Organization (WHO) Dashboard on the last day of the reporting period unless otherwise specified.

Definitions

“Cluster” in relation to COVID-19 refers to two or more cases (who do not reside in the same household) that are epidemiologically related in time, place or person where a common source (such as an event or within a community) of infection is suspected but not yet established.

“COVID-19” is the disease caused by a novel coronavirus—SARS-CoV-2—that emerged in China in late 2019. ‘CO’ stands for corona-, ‘V’ stands for virus, ‘ID’ stands for infectious disease, and ‘-19’ refers to the year that this disease was first reported.

“COVID-19 associated death” is defined for surveillance purposes as a death in a probable or confirmed COVID-19 case, unless there is a clear alternative cause of death that cannot be related to COVID-19 (e.g. trauma). There should be no period of complete recovery from COVID-19 between illness and death. Where a Coroner’s report is available, these findings are to be observed.

“Date of illness onset” is derived from data collected by the NNDSS and represents the diagnosis date, or reported true onset of disease date. If unknown, the earliest of specimen collection date, notification date or notification receive date is used.

“Notification received date” is reported in the NNDSS and represents the date the case is first notified on the NNDSS. As notification can only occur after testing is completed and information processed, counts for a defined period will vary according to the date type used.

“Outbreak” in relation to COVID-19 refers to two or more cases (who do not reside in the same household) among a specific group of people and/or over a specific period of time where illness is associated with a common source (such as an event or within a community). Some states and territories may report a single case associated with a residential aged care facility as an outbreak.
“SARS-CoV-2” is the virus that causes the disease COVID-19. It is a betacoronavirus genetically related to the 2003 Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV).

Acknowledgements

This supplement describes the technical background to the surveillance data reported through Communicable Diseases Network Australia (CDNA) as part of the nationally-coordinated response to COVID-19. We thank public health staff from incident emergency operations centres and public health units in state and territory health departments, and the Australian Government Department of Health, along with state and territory public health laboratories. We thank those who have provided data from surveillance systems, such as Commonwealth respiratory clinics, ASPREN, Flutracking, SPRINT-SARI, FluCAN, Communicable Disease Genomics Network, AusTrakka and jurisdictional sequencing laboratories.

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References


### Appendix A: Definitions for outbreak settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Inclusions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation &amp; housing</td>
<td>Includes high-density housing; hostels and backpackers; hotels and serviced apartments; public housing; rough sleeping; and temporary accommodation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged care</td>
<td>Includes residential aged care facilities; commonwealth aged care facilities; and home-care.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Healthcare (excl. hospital)</td>
<td>Includes primary care; and allied health services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>Includes inpatient acute and sub-acute hospital (including psychiatric units); day surgeries; and transitional care.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>Includes preschool child care services; and childcare services provided from home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational facility (excl. childcare)</td>
<td>Includes schools; universities; TAFE; kindergarten; after-school care; other education and training facilities; and higher educational facilities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workplace/industry</td>
<td>Includes warehouses (not food); supermarkets; utilities; residential work sites; office spaces; manufacturing; logistics; food distribution centres; construction sites; retail and supermarkets.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disability services</td>
<td>Includes disability services and private accommodation; and support services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food industry</td>
<td>Includes abattoirs; factory-based food production; meat and poultry processing facilities; food production (commercial fishing, grain, dairy); and fruit or vegetable farming.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospitality &amp; entertainment</td>
<td>Includes cinemas and theatres; bars and music venues; and food premises (e.g. restaurants; takeaway food; cafes).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel &amp; transport</td>
<td>Includes travel groups; cruise ships; cargo ships; mass transport (flights, trains, trams, buses); and other transport services (Uber and taxi).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justice &amp; emergency</td>
<td>Includes emergency services; correctional facilities; and prisons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Includes other various settings not captured by the other exposure settings, e.g. extended family gatherings (where two or more separate households come together); religious services; and sports and recreation venues.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Frequently asked questions

Q: Can I request access to the COVID-19 data behind your CDI fortnightly reports?

A: National notification data on COVID-19 confirmed cases is collated in the National Notifiable Disease Surveillance System (NNDSS) based on notifications made to state and territory health authorities under the provisions of their relevant public health legislation.

Normally, requests for the release of data from the NNDSS requires agreement from states and territories via the Communicable Diseases Network Australia, and, depending on the sensitivity of the data sought and proposed, ethics approval may also be required.

Due to the COVID-19 response, unfortunately, specific requests for NNDSS data have been put on hold. We are currently looking into options to be able to respond to data requests in the near future.

We will continue to publish regular summaries and analyses of the NNDSS dataset and recommend the following resources be referred to in the meantime:

- State and territory public health websites.

Q: Can I request access to data at postcode level of confirmed cases?

A: Data at this level cannot be released without ethics approval and permission would need to be sought from all states and territories via the Communicable Diseases Network Australia. As noted above, specific requests for NNDSS data are currently on hold.

Where current or recent reported case numbers are high enough to justify it, a GIS/mapping analysis of cases will be included in the CDI COVID-19 epidemiology report. In order to protect privacy of confirmed cases, data in this map will be presented at SA3 level.

Q: Where can I find more detailed data on COVID-19 cases?

A: We are currently looking into ways to provide more in-depth epidemiological analyses of COVID-19 cases, with regard to transmission and severity, including hospitalisation. These analyses will continue to be built upon in future iterations of the CDI report.

Q: Where do I find the COVID-19 background information which was included as Appendix A in previous fortnightly epidemiology reports?