Acute loss of smell may predict positive SARS-CoV-2 antibodies status

COVID-19 can cause temporary loss of taste and smell, but the prevalence of COVID-19 antibodies in people reporting these symptoms is unknown. A study in *PLOS Medicine* by Rachel Batterham at University College London and colleagues suggests that loss of smell may predict a positive SARS-CoV-2 antibody status, and that COVID-19 may commonly present in people experiencing a loss of smell and/or taste, but without cough or fever.

Currently, the majority of countries do not make recommendations for self-isolation and testing based upon acute loss of smell/taste and the significance of loss of smell and/or taste as a predictor of COVID-19 is not well understood. To estimate the seroprevalence of SARS-CoV-2 antibodies in people with acute loss of their sense of smell and/or taste, researchers enrolled 590 people self-reporting a loss of taste/smell in the previous month. Following verification of symptoms via a telemedicine consultation, 576 participants underwent a SARS-CoV-2 antibodies test.

Out of 567 people with smell and/or taste loss, 78% had SARS-CoV-2 antibodies, and participants with loss of smell were 3 times more likely to have SARS-CoV-2 antibodies compared to those with loss of taste, suggesting that a loss of smell is a highly specific symptom of COVID-19. Of the 78% of participants testing positive for antibodies, 40% had neither cough nor fever. While the study had limitations, such as the self-reporting of smell/taste changes and the lack of a control group, the researchers believe the evidence indicates that loss of smell should be taken into greater consideration in COVID-19 public health measures such as testing, case isolation, and treatment strategies.

According to the authors, “Our findings suggest that a key public health message is that people who notice a loss in their ability to smell everyday house-hold odors such as garlic, onions, coffee, and perfumes should self-isolate and seek PCR testing”.

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