# COVID-19: By the Numbers

April 6, 2020 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

While speaking to a close friend, he told me that he wasn't worried about COVID-19 since his odds of dying were low. There was a tiny bit of truth there, in that his risk of dying from COVID-19 was low. However, pandemics aren't like a game of chance. This particular person's risk of dying of complications from COVID-19 may be low, but that doesn't take in to account the people he could potentially transmit the virus to, and the people they spread it to. Add in exponential growth, and you have the nature of a pandemic; which in this situation is predicted to kill hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people.

A year ago, my risk of dying from COVID-19 was zero. When the first cases began to emerge in China, I assumed that my infection risk was low. Naively, I believed that my government and public health system would act swiftly and effectively to protect the public. I was wrong.

Now, my future, your future, our loved ones' future, and the future of all humankind rests on each of us. This is a huge responsibility, one that requires knowing what to do. I don't know about you, but I am still trying to sort out fact from fiction. In the past, when I haven't heard a consistent message from my leaders, I've looked to numbers to help guide me in my quest for information. However, numbers aren't always trustworthy, particularly now.

A Look at the Numbers

We don't know the real COVID-19 stats. Since testing for COVID-19 in the United States is poor at best, we don't know how many people have or have had this novel coronavirus. Additionally, we don't know how many people have died from it, since we've only tabulated confirmed cases. Deaths from unconfirmed COVID-19 aren't included in the data. People who die from other causes but who might have lived if they had been able to have earlier medical interventions, or who can't get access to ventilators, are also not calculated as part of the death toll.

Data collection isn't uniform.  Because of differences in various countries and regions, we don't have data. Some countries are doing an excellent job of testing and data collection; others aren't. There isn't much more to be said about this.

COVID-19 numbers depend on where and when you are infected. If you acquired COVID-19 a month ago, your chances of dying were lower because at that point there were more ventilators and healthy health care workers than there are now. If you acquire it at the peak of the curve, your survival risk is lower.

COVID-19 numbers change quickly. For instance, when I started writing this blog this morning (Sunday 4/5/2020), the number of confirmed cases was about 1,240,000; A few hours later, it is over 1,260, 000. If you click the link to the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 map, you will see a much larger number. Check the following day, and you can get a sense of how rapidly this is increasing. As we get closer to the peak, the rate of increase will climb rapidly until it flattens out. Click here to see projections for your state.

There is an emotional aspect to playing the odds, often attached to multiple factors. If my chances were one in hundred of winning a prize, I wouldn't take those odds in Vegas, but I would buy a ticket if the money supported a local charity. Although I wouldn't play in Vegas for any amount of money if my odds were one in hundred, I might give my state a dollar for a one in a million chance to win $50 million. If those same odds applied to my risk of dying from COVID-19, I'd just as soon stay at home. We make decisions on more than numbers.

In this case, odds aren't a good way to make decisions about how to conduct my life. I look to trusted experts for advice: Anthony Fauci, my medical provider, my state and county health department. In short, I am staying home except for infrequent grocery runs. Hope you are too.

Are you staying home? If not, are you an essential worker? If you are doing essential work, I am deeply grateful. Stay safe.

If you want to read more about COVID-19 or other health-related issues, I am also blogging at LucindaPorterRN.com.

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