

## Oxygen saturation, the pulseoximeter, and COVID

Paul Bergner

Editor, *Medical Herbalism*

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 infection are fever (commonly low grade), dry cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, and sometimes diarrhea or loss of sense of taste and/or smell. About 80% of individuals will have mild or moderate disease, The other 20% may require hospitalization and/or intensive care. If you have any of these symptoms, you should call your doctor for current advice, which is changing rapidly in the face of the pandemic, and also with the overcrowding of medical facilities. Mild symptoms, or no symptoms, do not rule out possible eventual serious illness.

The most important indicator of urgent need for medical care is difficulty breathing, but for many people the difference between “shortness of breath” and “difficulty breathing” may not be clear. If you have any question, consult your doctor. COVID-19 can infect the lungs and cause low oxygen even in individual with little or no fever.

One way to measure your serum oxygen is with a pulseoximeter, and inexpensive device that can be purchased online or at most drug stores and pharmacies. This uses light to measure the oxygen in the blood moving through the small vessels in your finger. The results are given in percent-oxygen-saturation.



- Normal levels are 95% to 98%
- Below 95% are considered low.
- Below 90% are considered critically low and requires immediate medical attention.
- Below 85% require immediate oxygen supplementation
- One medical site recommended that an individual at home with suspected COVID with levels below 93% with should immediately communicate with their doctor or emergency services if doctor is not available.

If taking your own oxygen saturation with a home product, take the measurement and watch it over time. You may see it fluctuate. You want to know its general average or where it settles. Nail polish can disturb the reading, as can bright light, or moving around.

Another simple method of judging “difficulty breathing” is the number of breaths per minute. For most adults, this will average between 12-18 breaths per minute, and more than that should be reported to your doctor. Over 24 breaths per minute is considered a sign of serious disease in COVID intensive care.