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60 mn Indians may have been exposed to virus: ICMR survey

Second nationwide sero-survey points to 10-fold jump in infections since May

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NEW DELHI

Around 7% of India's adult population may have been exposed to the novel coronavirus till the last fortnight of August, according to the second national sero-survey by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

This is roughly a 10-fold jump in numbers from the first sero-survey conducted by the Council across 70 districts in 21 States that sought to estimate the likely number of infected until early May. The people tested in the second survey were drawn from the same villages and clusters as the first, in which the scientists said that 0.73% of adults – or about 6.4 million – across the country were likely infected.

No figures were shared on the likely number of infections by ICMR Director General, Dr. Balram Bhargava, in his presentation on Tuesday. But 7% of the population works out to about 62 million people.

Sero-surveys are conducted by drawing blood samples and checking for a specific class of antibodies called IgG that appear within two weeks of an infection. Because it is yet unclear how long antibodies detectably persist in the body, their presence only indicates past ex-

Exposure check

The results of the two country-wide serological surveys and eight separate ones carried out in different cities

| Place | Study period | Seroprevalence (%) |
|------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| All India (round one) | May 11 - June 4 | 0.73 |
| All India (round two) | Aug. 17 - Sept. 22 | 6.60% |
| Delhi (round one) | 27 June - 10 July | 23.5 |
| Delhi (round two) | Aug. 1-7 | 29.1 |
| Mumbai | June 29 - July 19 | 57.8 (slums) 17.4 (non-slums) |
| Ahmedabad | June 16 - July 11 | 17.6 |
| Chennai | July 17-28 | 21.5 |
| Puducherry (round one) | Aug. 11-16 | 4.9 |
| Puducherry (round two) | Sept. 10-16 | 22.7 |
| Indore | Aug. 11-23 | 7.8 |

SOURCE: INDIAN COUNCIL FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH

posure to – and not presence of – the virus.

During the first survey, it emerged that there were 82-130 infections for every confirmed COVID-19 positive case. That number has now dropped to 26-32 infections, which according to Dr. Bhargava, was the result of ramped up testing and early case detection.

In September, there were 29 million tests, compared to 23 million in August, 10.5 million in July and 30,000 in March, according to Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan.

However, the numbers al-

so suggest that the country still has an overwhelming majority of its population yet to be exposed to the virus and therefore, is far from any peak or herd immunity levels. These refer to approximate estimates that show what percentage of the population needs to be exposed to the virus so that its spread is curtailed.

More risk in urban slums

"The risk of being exposed to the virus is real and we have to continue with our measures. Risk in urban slums is twice that of non-



Awaiting results: A health worker with blood samples collected for IgG antibody tests in Vijayawada. • R.V.S. GIRI

slums and four times that in rural settings," Dr. Bhargava said.

One in fifteen individuals above 10 were exposed to the virus by August and there was no difference by age group and gender.

"In light of upcoming festivities, winter season and mass gatherings, inventive containment strategies need to be implemented by States," Dr. Bhargava emphasised.

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60 mn may have been exposed to virus: survey

53,000 30/9/11
The country wide prevalence of the virus was similar to that seen in the United States, which was around 9.3%. Brazil and Spain had a prevalence of 2.8% and 4.6%, the ICMR said.

A scientist connected with the survey but who declined to be identified, said the final peer-reviewed version of the study would be available in a month. The lower rate of confirmed cases to true infections was due to an increase in testing as well as the large scale deployment of rapid antigen tests (these quick tests determine the presence of virus but tend to substantially miss infections).

"The opening up of the country has no doubt seen the virus spread and it is

quite likely that these numbers will increase. There needs to be a consistent decline for several weeks before we can think of having reached a peak," said the scientist.

The average prevalence in major cities ranged from 50% in Mumbai to 29% in New Delhi, 22% in Chennai and 7.8% in Indore. The sero-survey, which aims to capture national prevalence, sampled many more from rural India to reflect the population spread. On May 3, there were 49,720 confirmed cases and 3.7 million by September 1 – a 74-fold increase. As of Tuesday, India recorded 6.1 million confirmed infections, with about 9,50,000 active cases.