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1 in 5 Grocery Store Workers May Have COVID-19

In one small study, most workers who tested positive for the coronavirus had no symptoms and worked face-to-face with customers.

November 9, 2020 By Alicia Green

New findings published in the journal Occupational & Environmental Medicine show that grocery store workers are at higher risk for coronavirus infection. Furthermore, those who work closely with customers were five times more likely to test positive for the virus than other employees, reports BMJ.

For the investigation, researchers surveyed 104 employees who worked at a supermarket in Boston and received mandatory coronavirus testing in May. Employees completed a detailed questionnaire about their lifestyle, medical history, employment history, work patterns and role at the store as well as their work commute and any preventive measures they took to protect themselves against infection at work.

In addition, the workers provided information about possible symptoms of COVID-19 and exposures to the virus during the past two weeks. Scientists also collected details about their mental health from two questionnaires that evaluated depression and anxiety.

Results showed that 21 of 104 grocery store workers tested positive for the coronavirus (a prevalence of 20%), compared with a prevalence rate of 0.9% to 1.3% in the local community. Of individuals with COVID-19, 76% exhibited no symptoms, and 91% engaged in customer interactions. In comparison, 59% of workers who tested negative did not engage with shoppers.

Researchers also found that employees in supervisory roles were six times more likely to test positive for the coronavirus than their coworkers in other positions.

Of the 99 employees who completed mental health questionnaires, 24 workers disclosed feeling mild anxiety. Less than half (46%) of those employees reported being able to practice consistent social distancing at work, while 76% of those who could do so expressed no anxiety.

Scientists determined that the eight employees who were mildly depressed were less likely to practice social distancing consistently at work and more likely to use public transportation or shared rides to commute to work than those who weren’t depressed. Employees who commuted

by foot, bike or in their car were 90% less likely to be depressed.

“This is the first study to demonstrate significant asymptomatic infection rate, exposure risks and associated psychological distress of grocery retail essential workers during the pandemic,” wrote study authors. “Once essential workers are infected with SARS-CoV-2, they may become a significant transmission source for the community they serve.”

To ensure the health and safety of essential workers, scientists called on employers and government officials to find ways to reduce interpersonal contact and administer repeat and routine coronavirus testing to employees, among other preventive interventions.

Additionally, researchers suggested that companies offer comprehensive mental health services to essential workers to address the psychological distresses they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For related coverage, read “Latinos Working in Food Processing and Agriculture Face Greater COVID-19 Risk.”

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