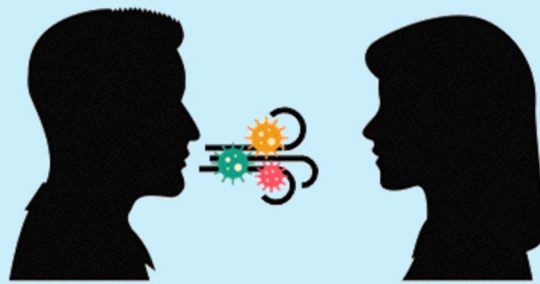


# **FLU, COVID-19, MEASLES, TUBERCULOSIS... DISEASES THAT TRANSMIT THROUGH THE AIR**

## **UNDERSTANDING AIRBORNE TRANSMISSION**



# DRAFT

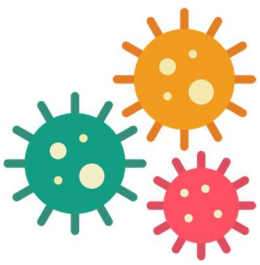
**This document is the intermediary result of a scientific mediation project on airborne diseases. It is the fruit of the collegial work of a multi-disciplinary group including clinicians, virologists, pneumologists, pediatricians, epidemiologists, aerosol specialists, engineers, scientific mediators, etc. It can be seen as the demonstrator or prototype of a larger project, and has enabled, among other things, the development of a collaborative and iterative working methodology.**

**Version 2.22 of 2025-06-07**

**Contact : [info@letsair.org](mailto:info@letsair.org)**

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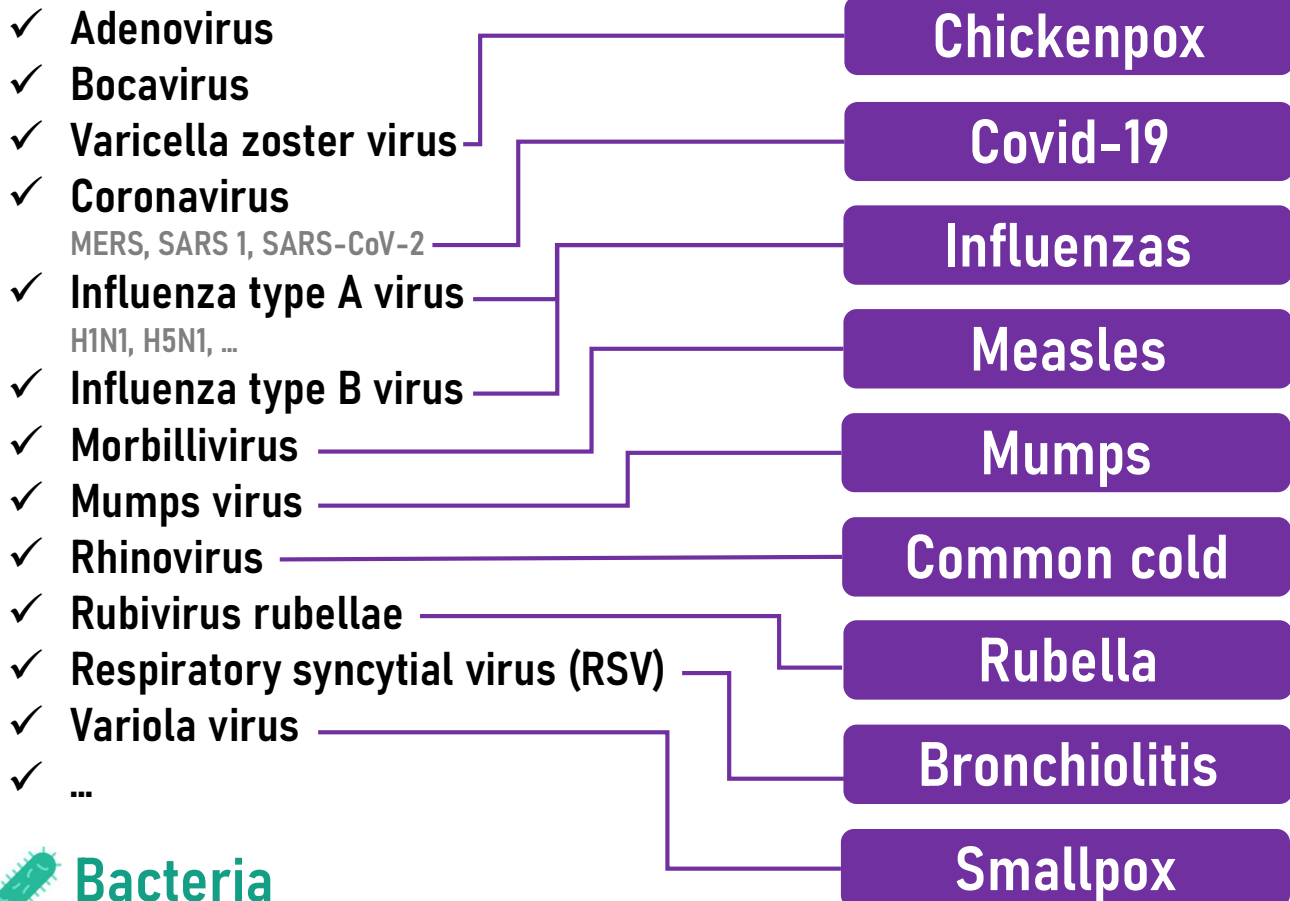
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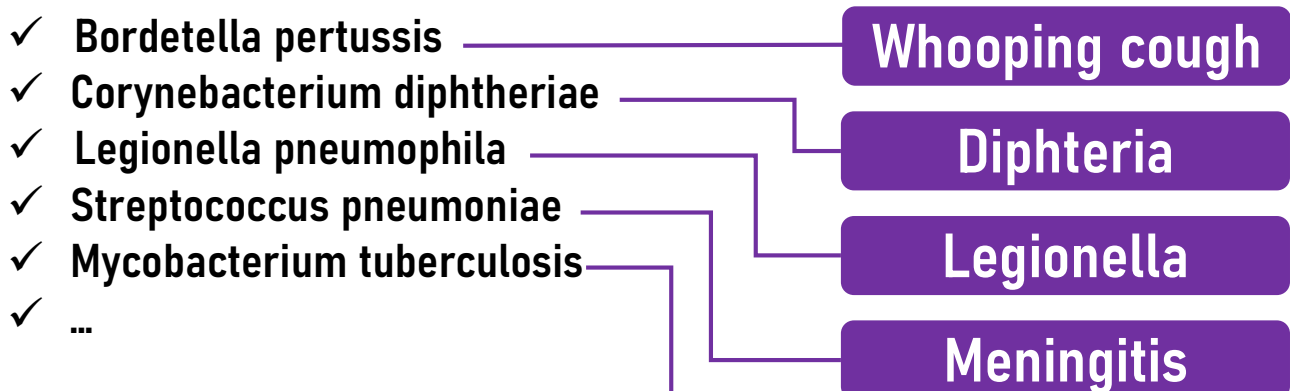
# EXAMPLES OF DISEASES FROM PATHOGENS THAT CAN BE TRANSMITTED THROUGH THE AIR WE BREATHE

## Associated Diseases

### Viruses

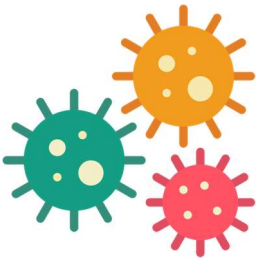


### Bacteria

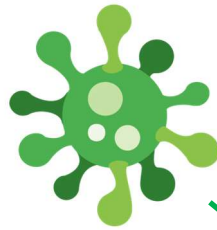


### Fungi

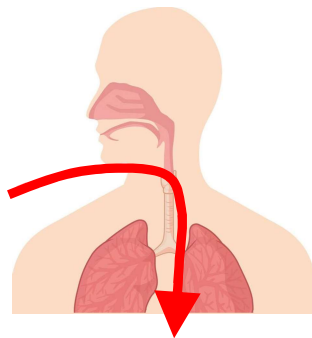




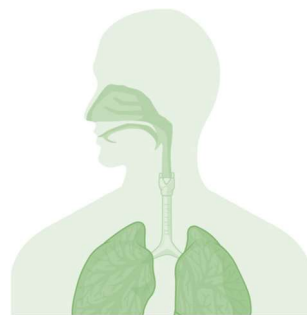
# PATHOGENS, SYMPTOMS, DISEASES



A pathogen (virus, bacteria, fungi)



infects an exposed person



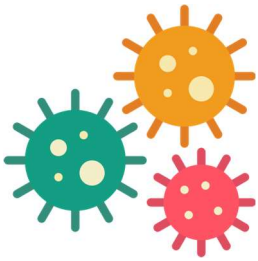
does not infect an exposed person



The person develops symptoms, is ill, develops the disease associated with the pathogen and is said to be **"symptomatic"**.



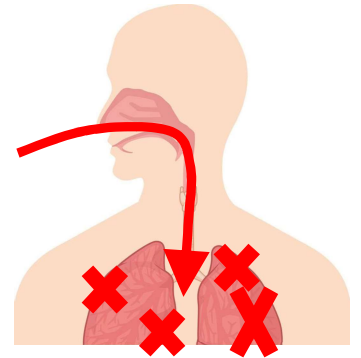
The person develops no symptoms, is infected but not ill, is said to be **"asymptomatic"**,



# RESPIRATORY VIRUSES AND OTHER VIRUSES

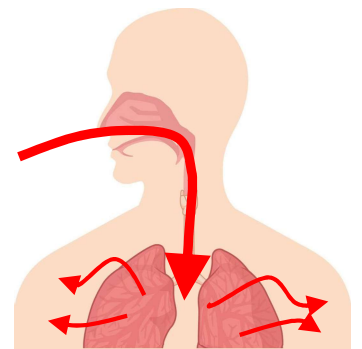
## “IN & STAY” RESPIRATORY VIRUS

This is a virus whose entry point and target is the respiratory tract. This corresponds to viruses transmitted via the respiratory tract and essentially targeting the respiratory system: flu, parainfluenza, RSV, ...



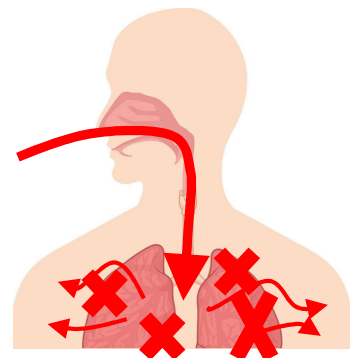
## “IN & RUN” RESPIRATORY VIRUS

This a virus with a respiratory entry point but which do not primarily target the respiratory system: chickenpox, measles,...



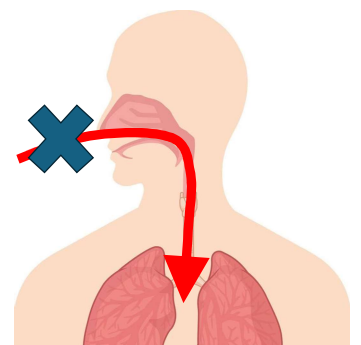
## “IN & SPREAD” RESPIRATORY VIRUS

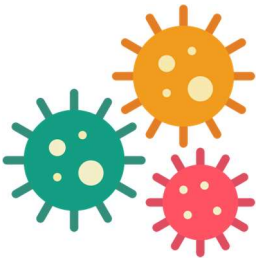
This a virus with a respiratory entry point then spreads to several organs: COVID-19



## NON-RESPIRATORY VIRUS

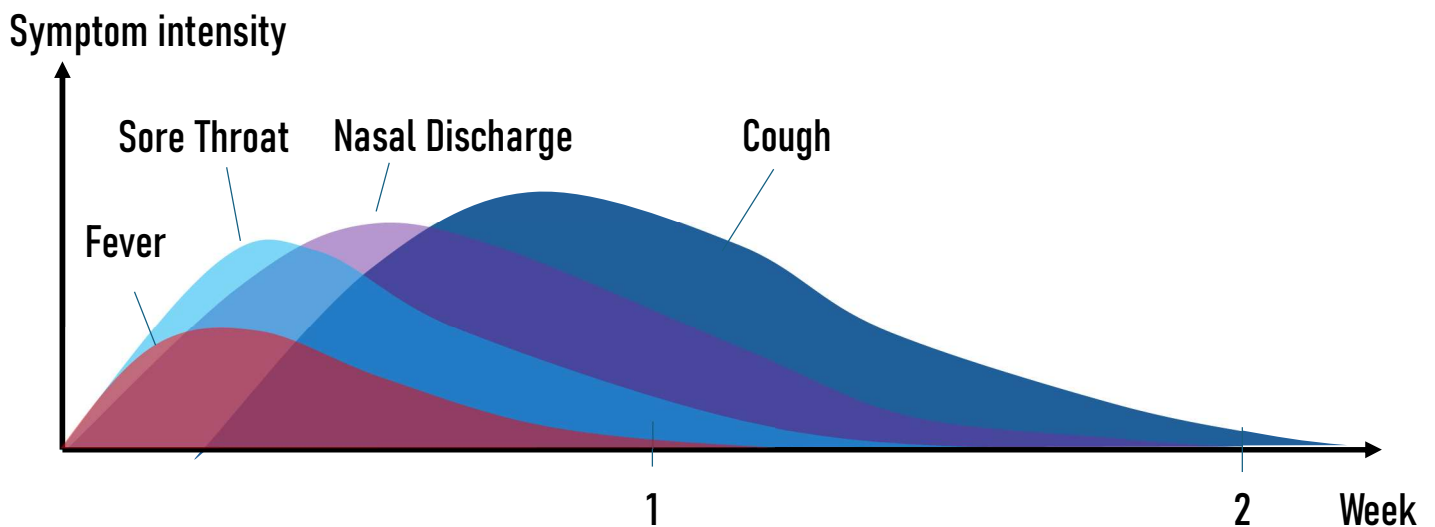
There are viruses that are clearly not respiratory and whose entry point and target are not respiratory: HIV, HBV, ...



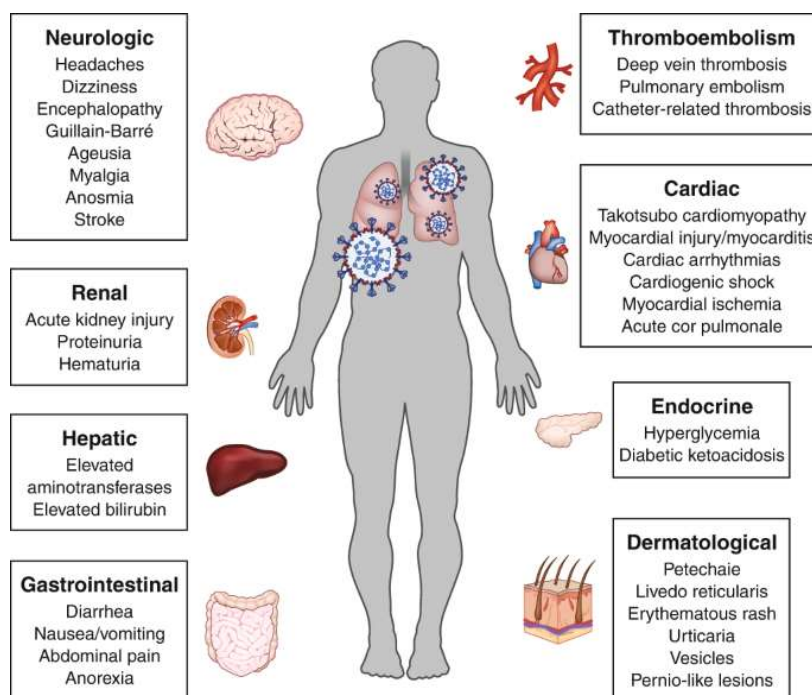


# NATURE AND EVOLUTION OF SYMPTOMS

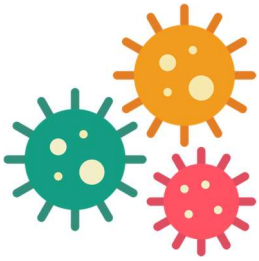
When infected by a pathogen, several symptoms may appear at different times during the illness. The number and intensity of symptoms can vary from person to person. This graph below is for illustrative purposes only.



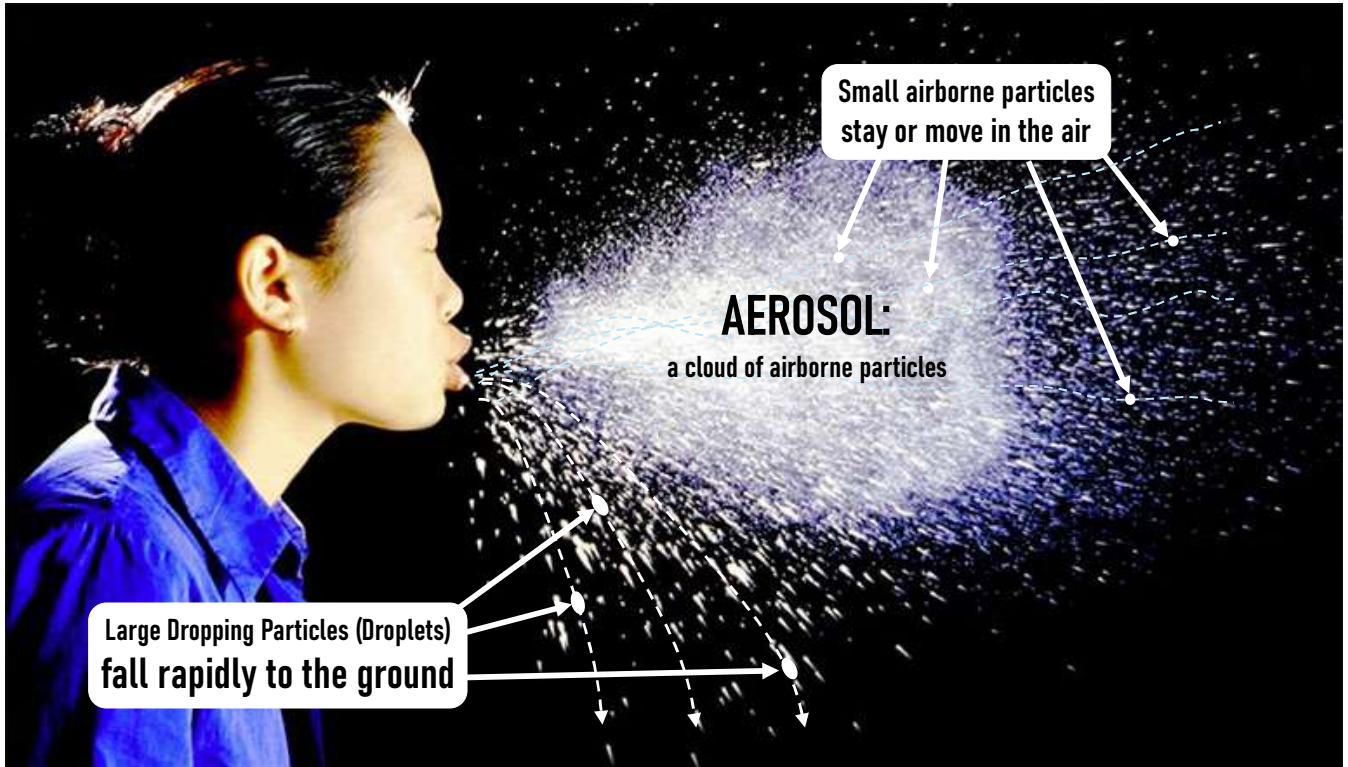
In the case of COVID-19, a wide range of organs can be affected.



See reference [5]

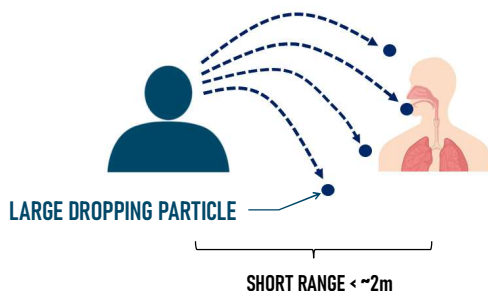


# HOW ARE AIRBORNE DISEASES TRANSMITTED? THE ROLE OF INFECTIOUS RESPIRATORY PARTICLES



## DEPOSITION OF PARTICLES

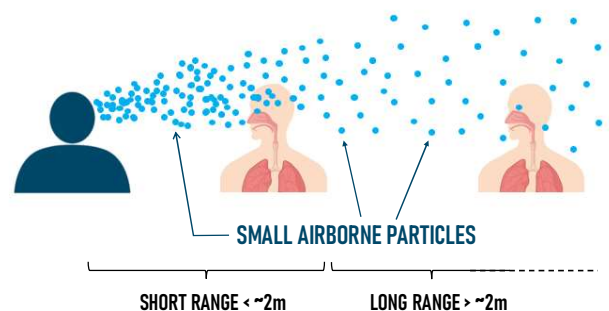
ON THE MUCOUS MEMBRANES OF THE MOUTH, NOSE, EYES



- transmission by semi-ballistic particles (also known as “droplets”)
- trajectories are governed by gravity
- fall quickly after travelling a few meters
- do not travel long distances

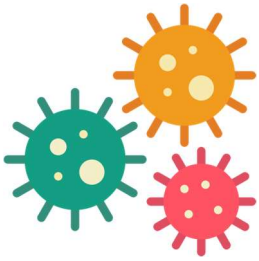
## INHALATION & DEPOSITION

OF PARTICLES IN THE UPPER RESPIRATORY TRACT



- transmission by airborne particles (also known as “aerosols”)
- trajectories are influenced by airflow
- suspended in the air, sometimes for hours
- can travel long distances



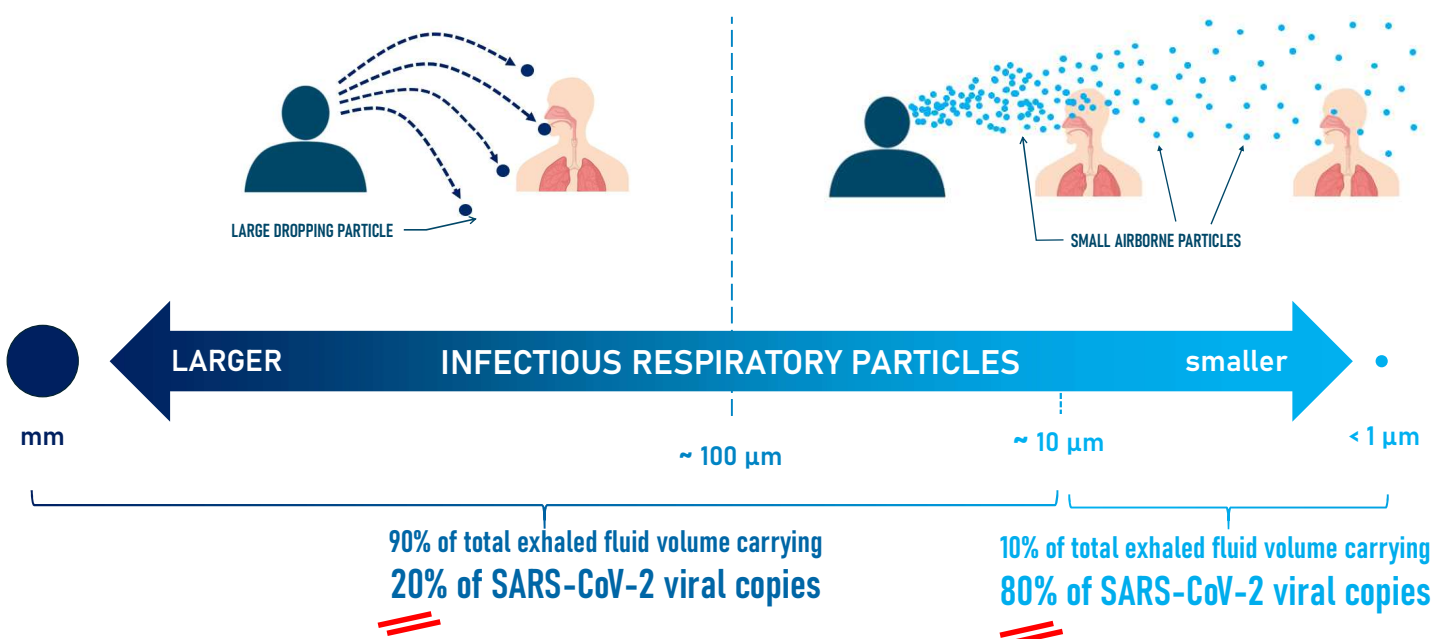


# HOW ARE AIRBORNE DISEASES TRANSMITTED? THE ROLE OF INFECTIOUS RESPIRATORY PARTICLES

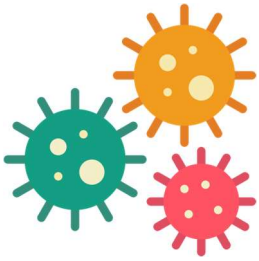
Infectious Respiratory Particles exist on a continuous spectrum of sizes (from sub-microns to millimeters in diameter) and their behavior and trajectories in the air depend on several parameters : ambient air temperature, velocity, humidity, sunlight (ultraviolet radiation), airflow distribution within a space...

The two diagrams below are a simplified representation, showing the behavior of physical particles from the smallest (right) and largest (left) in size. The transition from one behavior to another is continuous, with hybrid and often complex overlap. The two routes correspond to « Inhalation » and « Direct deposition » modes of transmission, as defined by the WHO.

The limits of  $10\mu\text{m}$  and  $100\mu\text{m}$  and percentages are approximate and serve as an indication.



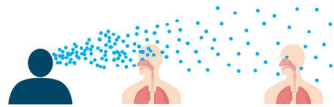




# TERMINOLOGIES FOR DISEASES THAT TRANSMIT THROUGH THE AIR


Numerous terminologies have been used in the past to describe the two routes of contamination: inhalation and direct deposition. These terminologies have evolved over time and vary according to the disciplines concerned (physics, health, etc.). Here are a few examples of terminology found in articles or reports:

Mode of contamination:  
**Inhalation**



Mode of contamination:  
**Direct deposition**



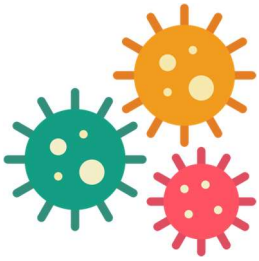
SHORT & LONG RANGES AIRBORNE PARTICLES		SHORT RANGE SEMI-BALLISTIC PARTICLES	
AIRBORNE PARTICLES		BALLISTIC PARTICLES	
 <b>INFECTIOUS RESPIRATORY PARTICLES</b>			
AEROSOLS	DROPOSOLS	DROPLETS	
AEROSOL PARTICLES		LARGER DROPLETS	
BIOAEROSOLS / VIROSOLS		DROPLETS	
AIRBORNE DROPLETS		BALLISTIC DROPLETS	
AIRBORNE DROPLET NUCLEI		DROPLETS	

To make it easier for non-specialists to discover the subject, we recommend using the following terms:



SMALL AIRBORNE PARTICLES

LARGE DROPPING PARTICLES

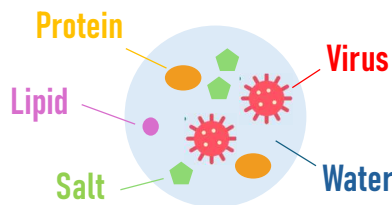


# WHAT IS AN AEROSOL ?

Aerosol refers to the suspension, in a gaseous medium (air, in most cases), of liquid or solid particles, or both, with negligible limit falling velocity. In air, under normal conditions, this corresponds to particles between a few fractions of a nanometer and 100µm in size. The aerosol is therefore a two-phase system formed by particles and the carrier gas. Nevertheless, the term aerosol is often used in practice to refer only to particles in the air.

in "Les aérosols physique et métrologie", Boulaud, D. and A. Renoux, Paris, Tec Doc Lavoisier(1998)

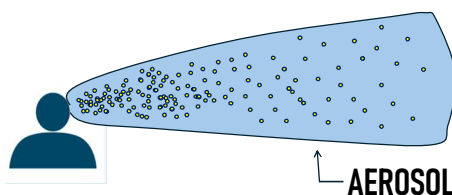
Bioaerosols (short for biological aerosols) are aerosols whose airborne particles contain living microorganisms (viruses, bacteria, molds and protozoa) and substances or by-products derived from these organisms. In the case of a virus, the composition of an airborne infectious particle will be as follows:



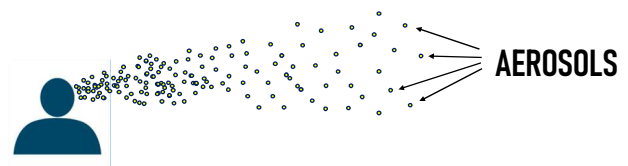
*Components of an airborne infectious particle*

In scientific literature, aerosol (or bioaerosol) describes a group of particles or cloud, but also designates each particle or "aerosol (bioaerosol) particle"; this can lead to confusion and inaccuracy :

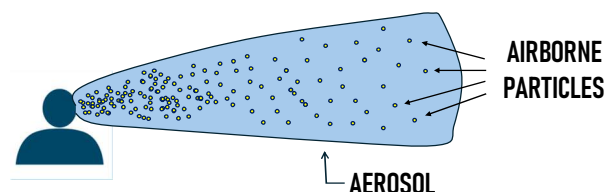
## AEROSOL SEEN AS A CLOUD OF PARTICLES



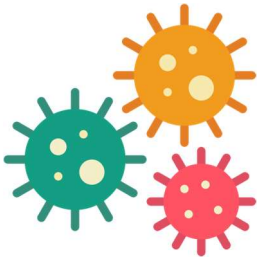
## AEROSOLS SEEN AS AIRBORNE PARTICLES



Our recommendation: it is preferable to use the term 'aerosol' ('bioaerosol') to designate the cloud of particles suspended in the air, and to refer to the constituents of this aerosol (bioaerosol) cloud as "Particles". We can then specify that these are "airborne particles".

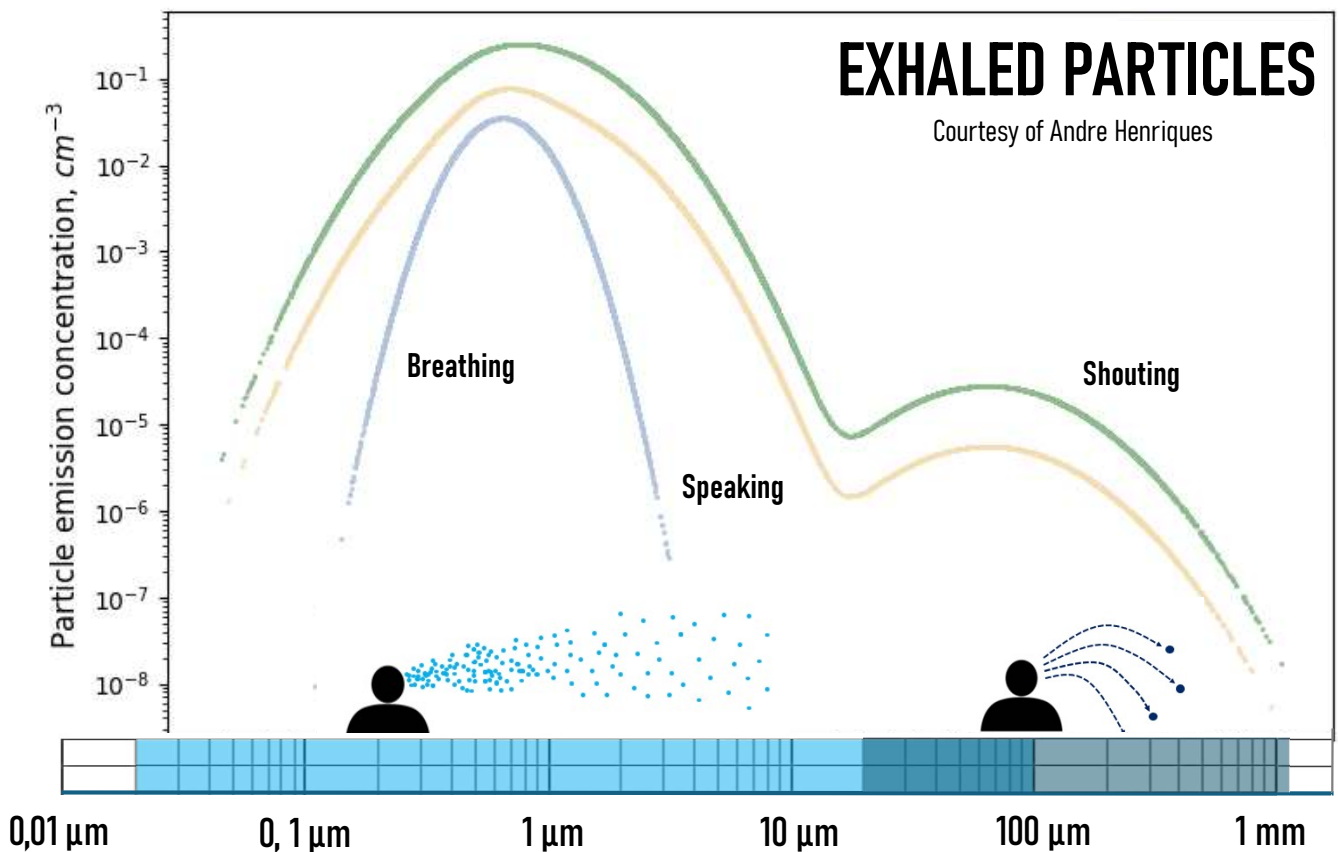


***An aerosol is made up of airborne particles.***



# EXHALED PARTICLE SIZE

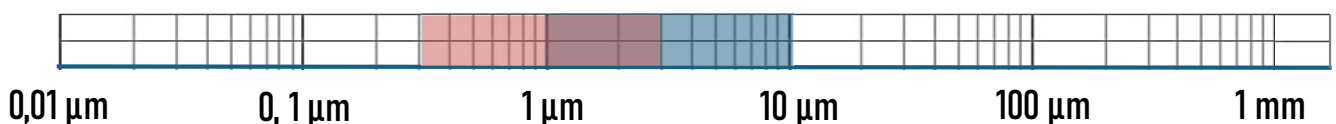
The number of particles exhaled by a human depends on the size considered. These particles are generated in different parts of our anatomy, which explains the variations in size. Their distribution and number depend on the activity performed: breathing, speaking, shouting.

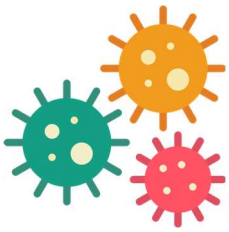


Airborne infectious particles are well suited to being inhaled into our lungs. Some of these particles are the same size as those making up the therapeutic aerosols generated by inhalers, designed to target certain parts of the lungs.



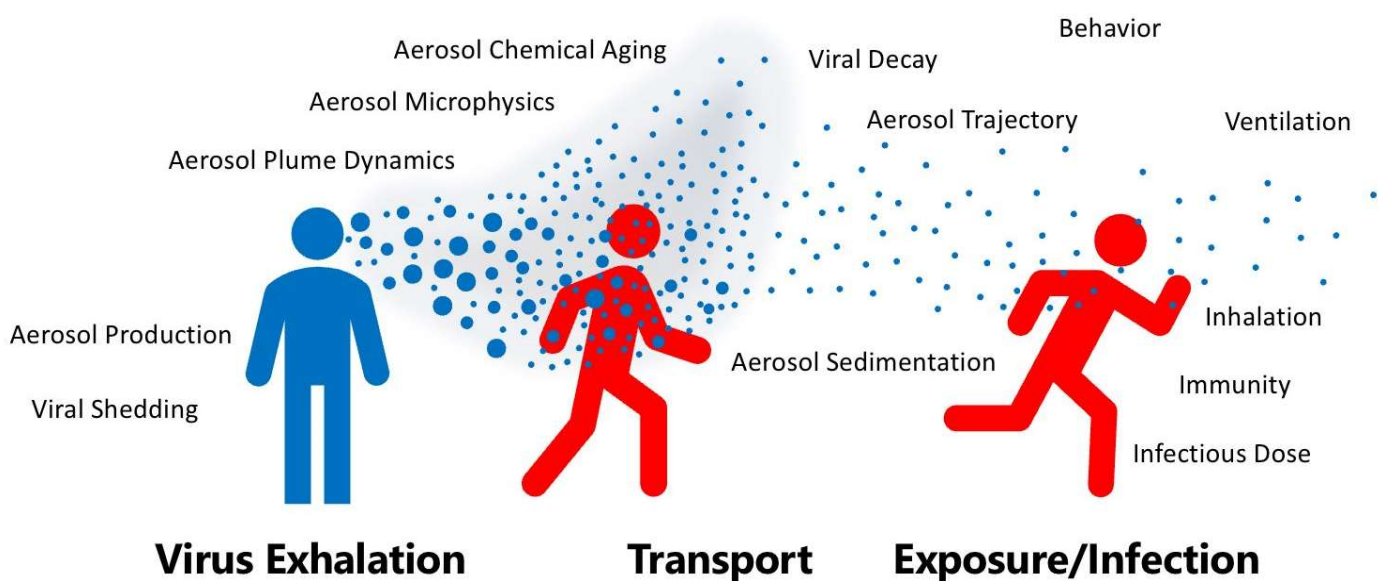
## THERAPEUTIC AEROSOLS





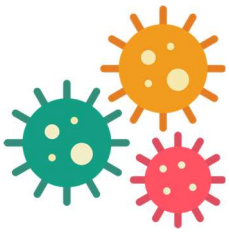
# KEY PHENOMENA TO CONSIDER IN THE STUDY OF AIRBORNE TRANSMISSION

Airborne disease transmission is an extremely complex process, involving fundamentally different scientific fields. A comprehensive understanding of the transmission phenomenon and its influencing factors requires expertise from many disciplines, as shown in the figure below [Courtesy of Al Haddrell]



The corresponding field of research is therefore highly multidisciplinary, drawing on numerous disciplinary expertise. Establishing a methodological framework that promotes collaboration between all these disciplines is one of the major challenges for teams working in this field. Several initiatives have emerged in recent years that move in this direction

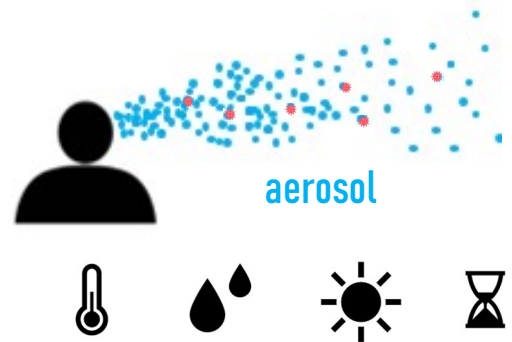
It is also worth noting the importance of engineering, which could provide concepts, tools, and methodologies from systems engineering to address these challenges of multi-disciplinary collaboration and integration. A "systems" view of Airborne Disease Transmission seems to us an interesting avenue to follow.



# INFECTIONS & RISKS

## VIRAL LOADS

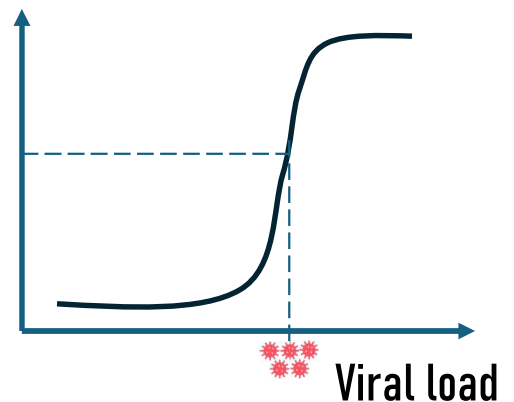
- Carried by airborne infectious particles.
- A virus may be more present in small particles.
- Load depends on particle size, time, temperature, humidity, UV exposure, ...



## INFECTIOUS DOSE

- Depends on virus type/variant,
- Depends on receptor type and localization
- For a given viral load, we rather define a probability of infection

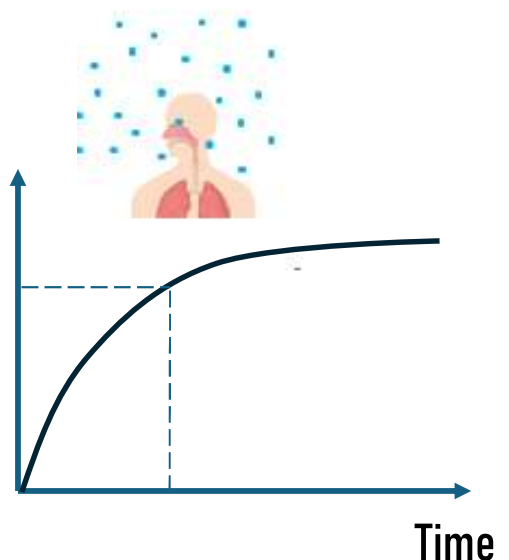
Probability of infection

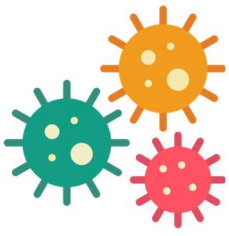


## RISK ASSESSMENT

- Depends on the person
- Depends on exposure conditions
- Depends on exposure time
- ...

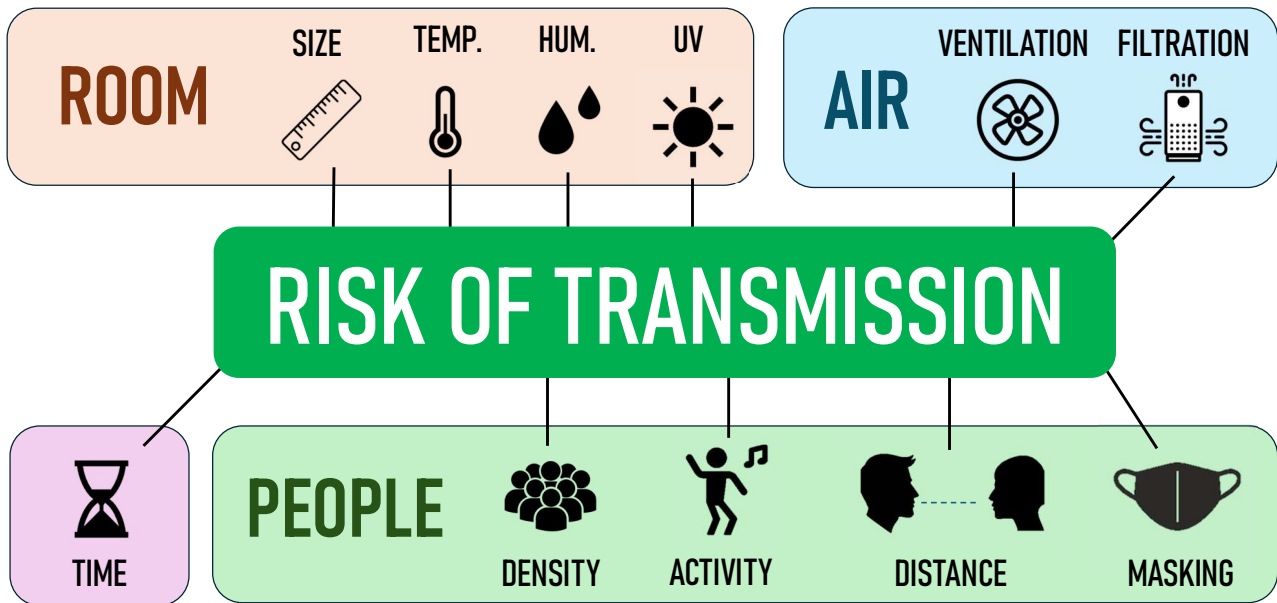
Risk of contamination



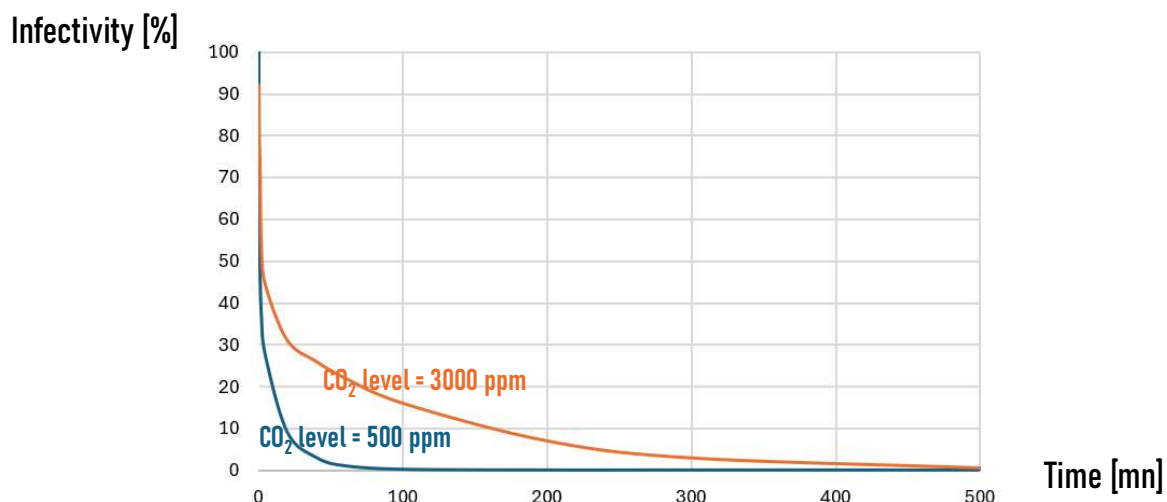


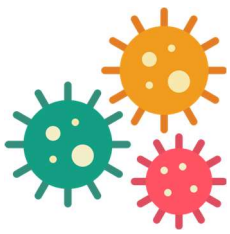
# PARAMETERS INFLUENCING THE RISK OF TRANSMISSION

For a given pathogen, the risk of interpersonal transmission therefore depends on a very large number of factors:



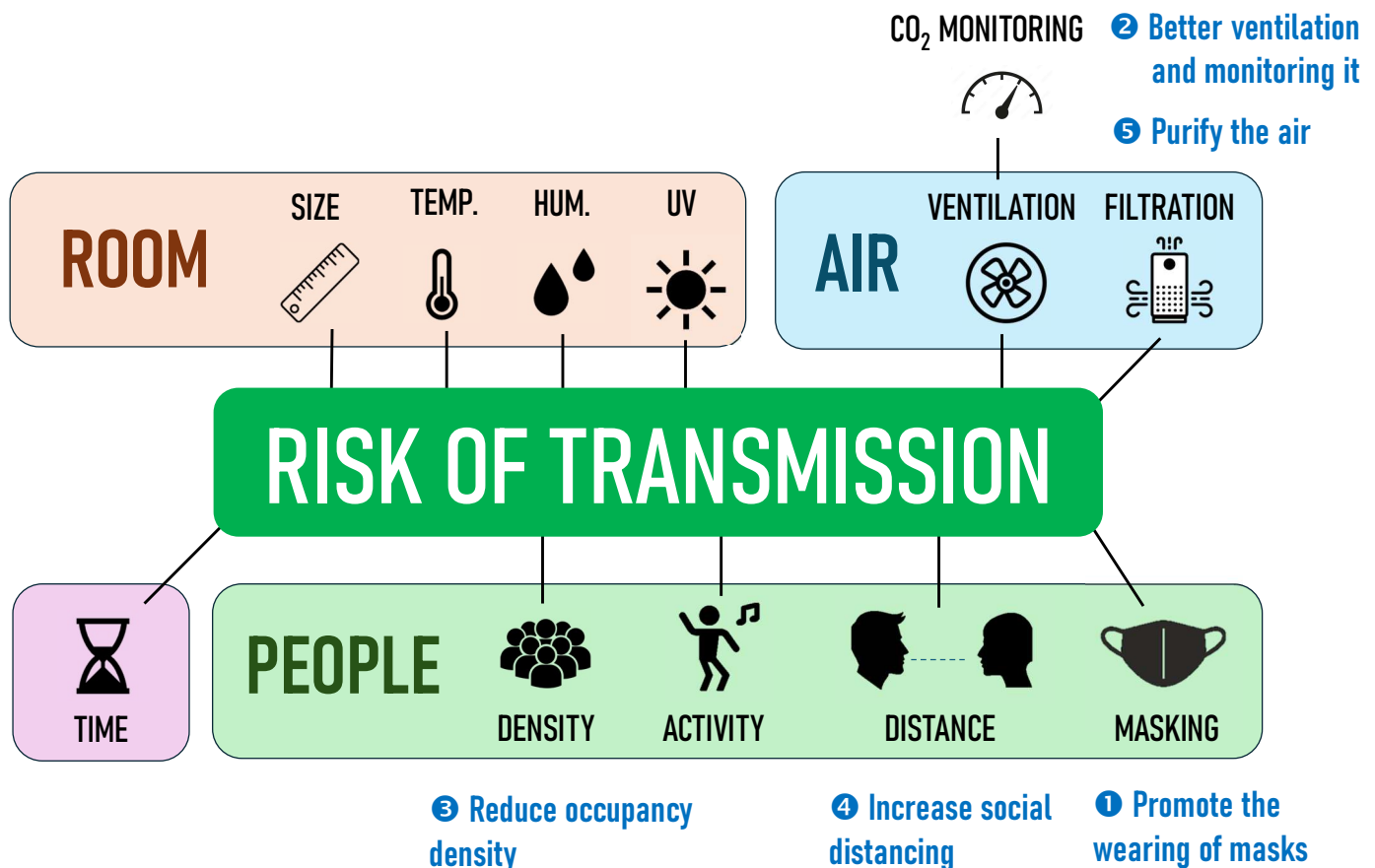
These factors are the subject of research, and many studies published in recent years have allowed us to study the influence of certain parameters. Much research, very multidisciplinary, remains to be carried out to progress in our understanding and many elements remain to be consolidated. Among this research work, we can cite an article<sup>[1]</sup> published in 2024 studying the influence of time and CO<sub>2</sub> levels on the infectivity of SARS-CoV-2 in an airborne particle (the graph is a free adaptation of the data from the article):





# WAYS TO MITIGATE THE RISKS OF AIRBORNE DISEASES

To mitigate transmission of airborne diseases, several means are available:



In some countries, airborne transmission of pathogens is well understood and integrated into individual and collective social practices. Several measures can then be mobilized and recommended simultaneously, depending on the context and the intensity of the risk. This is what the Japanese government did in 2020 with the "Three Cs," see opposite.

In many countries, progress remains to be made in this area.

Important notice for preventing COVID-19 outbreaks.

## Avoid the "Three Cs"!

- 1. Closed spaces** with poor ventilation.
- 2. Crowded places** with many people nearby.
- 3. Close-contact settings** such as close-range conversations.

One of the key measures against COVID-19 is to prevent occurrence of clusters. Keep these "Three Cs" from overlapping in daily life.

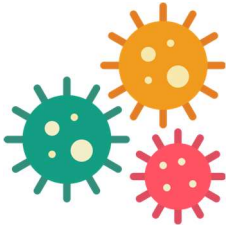
The risk of occurrence of clusters is particularly high when the "Three Cs" overlap!

In addition to the "Three Cs," items used by multiple people should be cleaned with disinfectant.

首相官邸 (Prime Minister's Office of Japan) 厚生労働省 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare)

MHLW COVID-19 Search

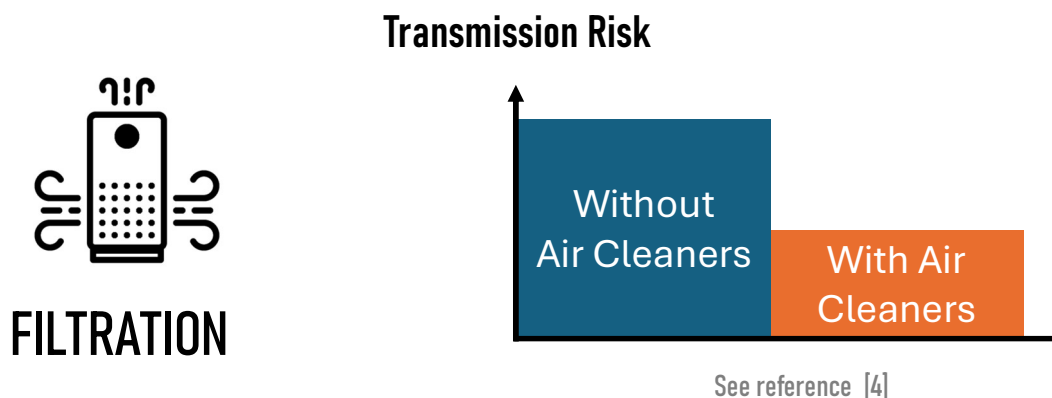
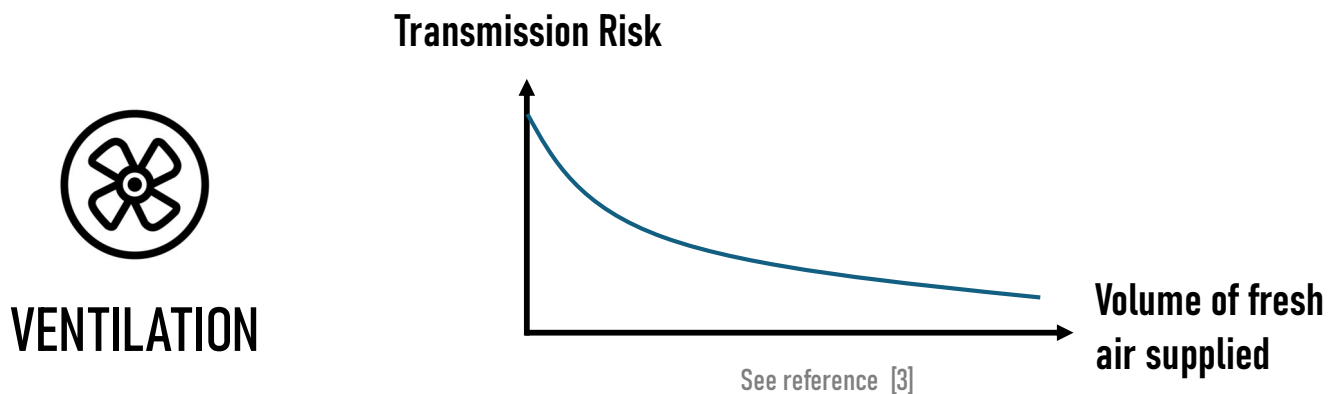
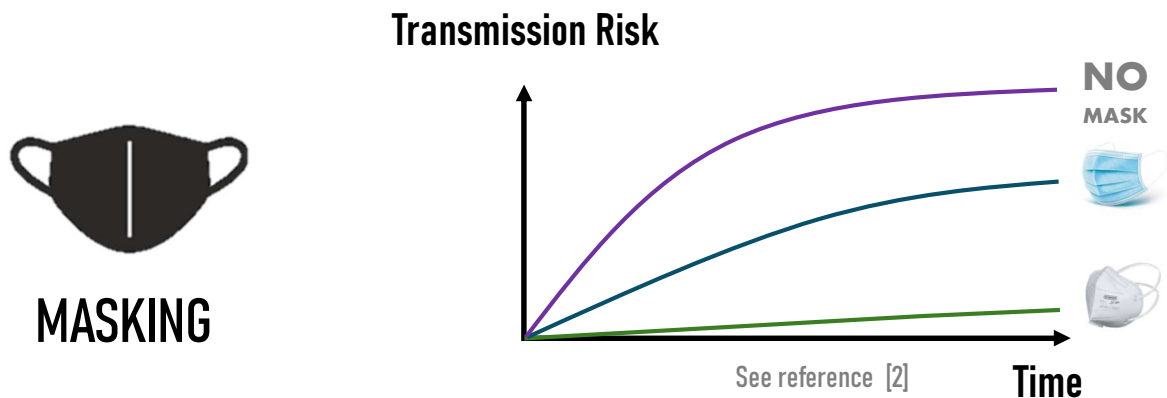


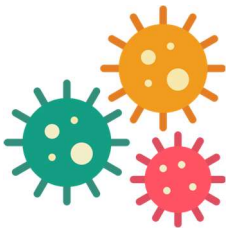


# QUANTIFY THE RISK REDUCTION BASED ON MITIGATION MEANS

For a given situation, the 3 main ways to reduce the risk of airborne contamination are masking, ventilation and filtration. Quantifying the risk for each of these means is still the subject of much research, modeling and studies.

Below you will find trends from recent research findings. The figures are adapted from research data and freely represented to illustrate observed trends.





# QUANTIFICATION OF INDOOR AIR RENEWAL

To measure or to specify the quality of air renewal in a room, and therefore assess the risk of airborne transmission, three metrics can be used: CO<sub>2</sub> level, Air Change per Hour, or Airflow per Person.



## CO<sub>2</sub> LEVEL

Measuring the CO<sub>2</sub> level in a room is a simple way of determining the level of containment. The higher the CO<sub>2</sub> level, the greater the containment. The value that is usually recommended not to exceed is 800ppm. (Parts Per Million is the usual unit). Reliable, inexpensive detectors are now available, and anyone can use them to check that the air is properly renewed.



## AIR CHANGE PER HOUR

To ensure good air renewal in a room, you can specify the number of times the air in the room is renewed each hour. This number is known as ACH (Air Change per Hour). A widely recommended value for most general-purpose premises is 6: the air is renewed 6 times an hour. The room's ventilation system enables this renewal to take place.



## AIRFLOW PER PERSON

To take account of the actual use of a room, you can specify the volume of fresh air to be supplied for each person in the room. In this case, we specify a volume per hour and per person (m<sup>3</sup>/h/p or CFM per person or liters/s/person). The higher the value, the better the air renewal. For example, 30 m<sup>3</sup>/h/p or 18 CFM/p can be a good value for a classroom.



## CLASSROOM EXAMPLE

**Surface = 60 m<sup>2</sup> / 646 ft<sup>2</sup>**

**Ceiling height = 2.5 m / 82 ft**

**Number of children = 30**

**MAXIMUM CO<sub>2</sub> LEVEL = 800ppm**

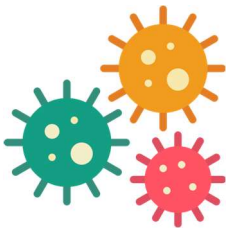
You can simply measure it with a CO<sub>2</sub> monitor and adapt the ventilation to the measurement.

**AIR CHANGE PER HOUR = 6**

The ventilation must be able to provide  $60 * 2.5 * 6 = 900$  m<sup>3</sup>/h or 530 CFM.

**AIRFLOW PER PERSON = 30 m<sup>3</sup>/h/p or 18 CFM/p**

The ventilation must be able to provide  $30 * 30 = 900$  m<sup>3</sup>/h or 530 CFM.

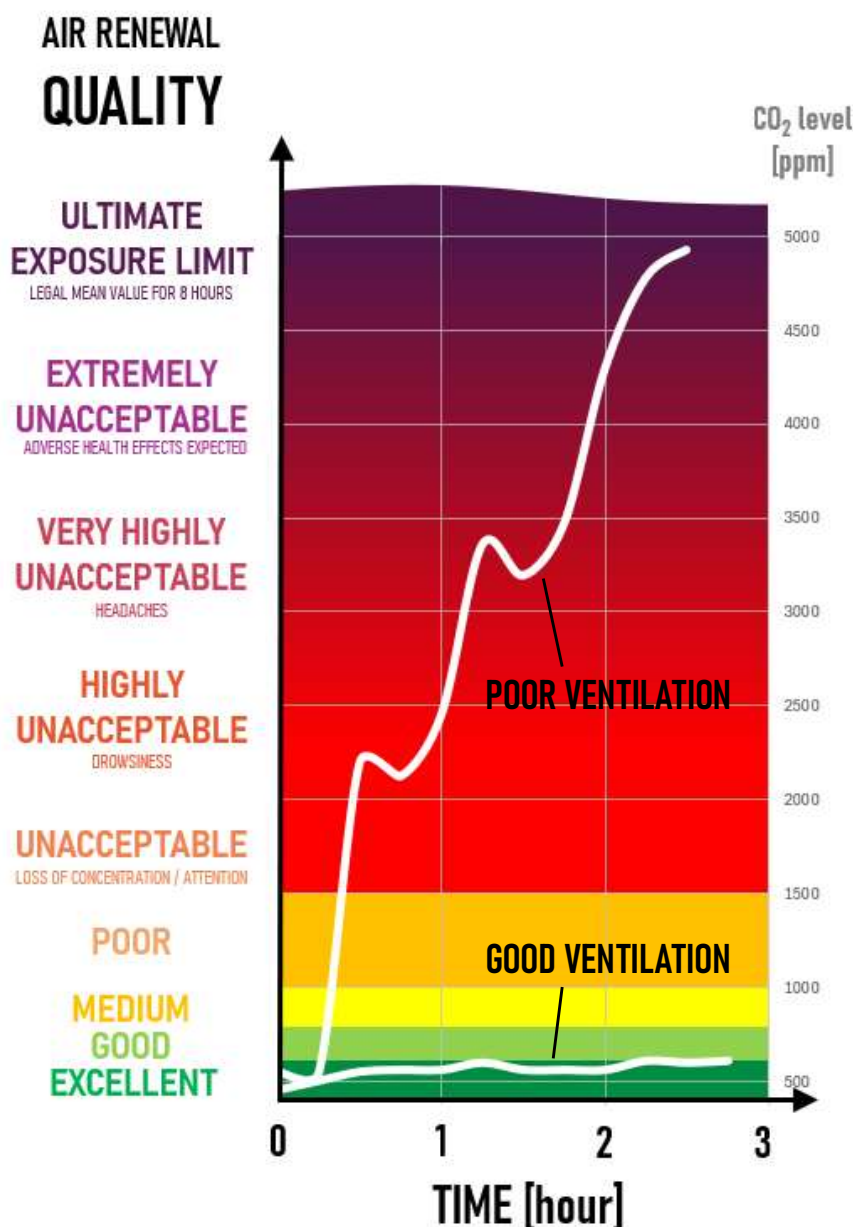


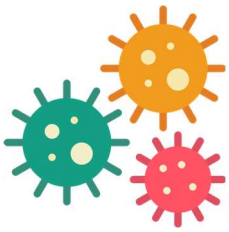
# MEASURING CO<sub>2</sub> LEVEL TO ASSESS TRANSMISSION RISK

In an occupied room, the CO<sub>2</sub> level is higher when ventilation is poor. By measuring the CO<sub>2</sub> level, we can therefore assess whether the air renewal in a room is excellent, good, poor, insufficient or unacceptable.

Today, the maximum recommended CO<sub>2</sub> level is 800 ppm (parts per million). If we take the example of schools, in many countries the majority of classrooms are not or poorly ventilated and the level of 800 ppm is unfortunately exceeded after only a few minutes. The risk of airborne disease transmission is therefore significant.

Below are two real-life measurements in a very well-ventilated classroom and a very poorly ventilated classroom.

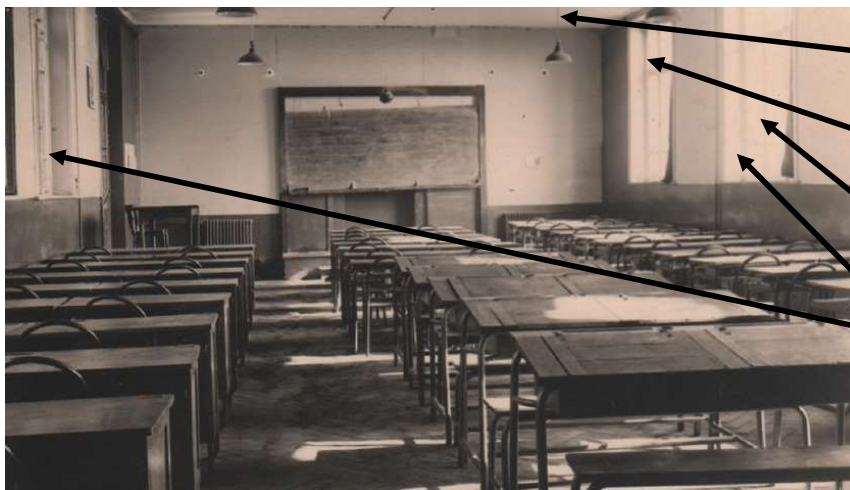




# HISTORY OF INDOOR AIR RENEWAL FOR THE PREVENTION OF AIRBORNE DISEASES

The importance of good indoor air renewal for the prevention of diseases that transmit through the air has been well known for centuries. And the measurement of CO<sub>2</sub> to assess the quality of air renewal has been known and used since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, these elements were fully integrated into a course at MIT in 1888 (Heating and Ventilation by S. H. Woodbridge).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, recommendations have been given for designing and constructing buildings that allow for excellent natural or forced ventilation. This is particularly the case for hospitals and schools. Their architecture owes much to these rules, as in the examples below.



**High ceilings** to increase room volume

**High window** for continuous ventilation

**Large window** opens wide for better ventilation

**Opposing openings** for through-air flow

**All windows face directly outside** (rather than into a corridor, for example) to improve ventilation.

Practical School of Agriculture (Wagonville) - 1896



**High ceilings** to increase room volume

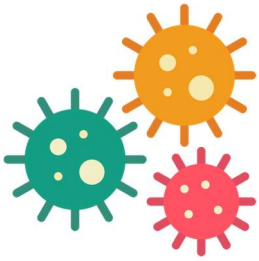
**Large window** opens wide for better ventilation

**Largely dimensioned natural ventilation system**

**Windows distributed all around the ward** to allow through-air flows

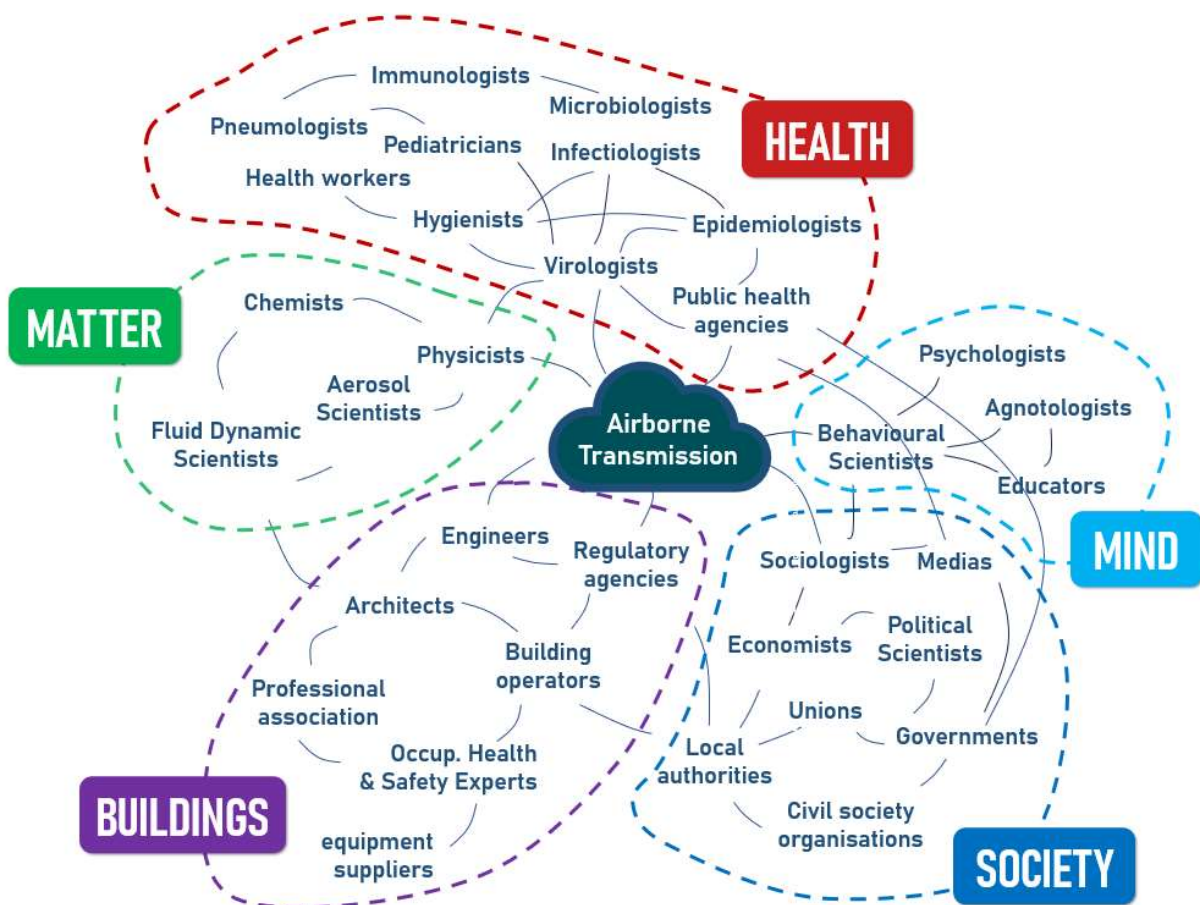
Octagon Ward of the John Hopkins Hospital (Baltimore) - 1880

The importance of good indoor air renewal, one of the means of prevention at that time, was gradually lost, particularly with the arrival of vaccines against airborne diseases in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: tuberculosis, measles, ... COVID-19 reminded us of this.



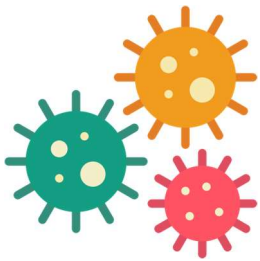
# PREVENTION STAKEHOLDERS

The means of limiting airborne contamination are well known, and in some cases have been for over a century: masks, ventilation of premises, air filtration. The difficulty in implementing these measures, particularly in buildings open to the public, is the large number of stakeholders involved. Below, we have attempted to model the main stakeholders involved in airborne contamination.



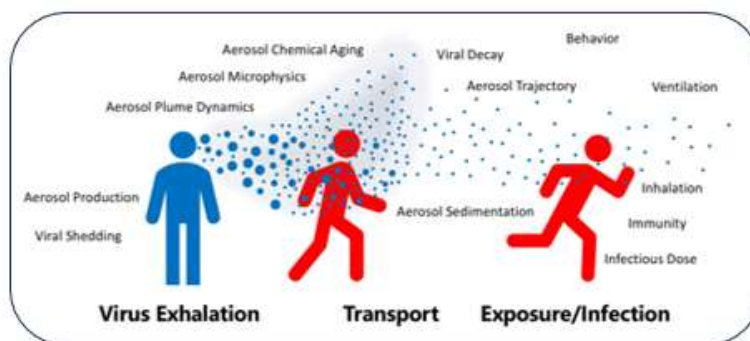
One of the key questions in risk management is: where is an investment most effective at reducing risk and do we have any means of intervening there? This is a massively interdisciplinary question that is still widely debated. Answering this question is critical to guiding public health policies on this topic.



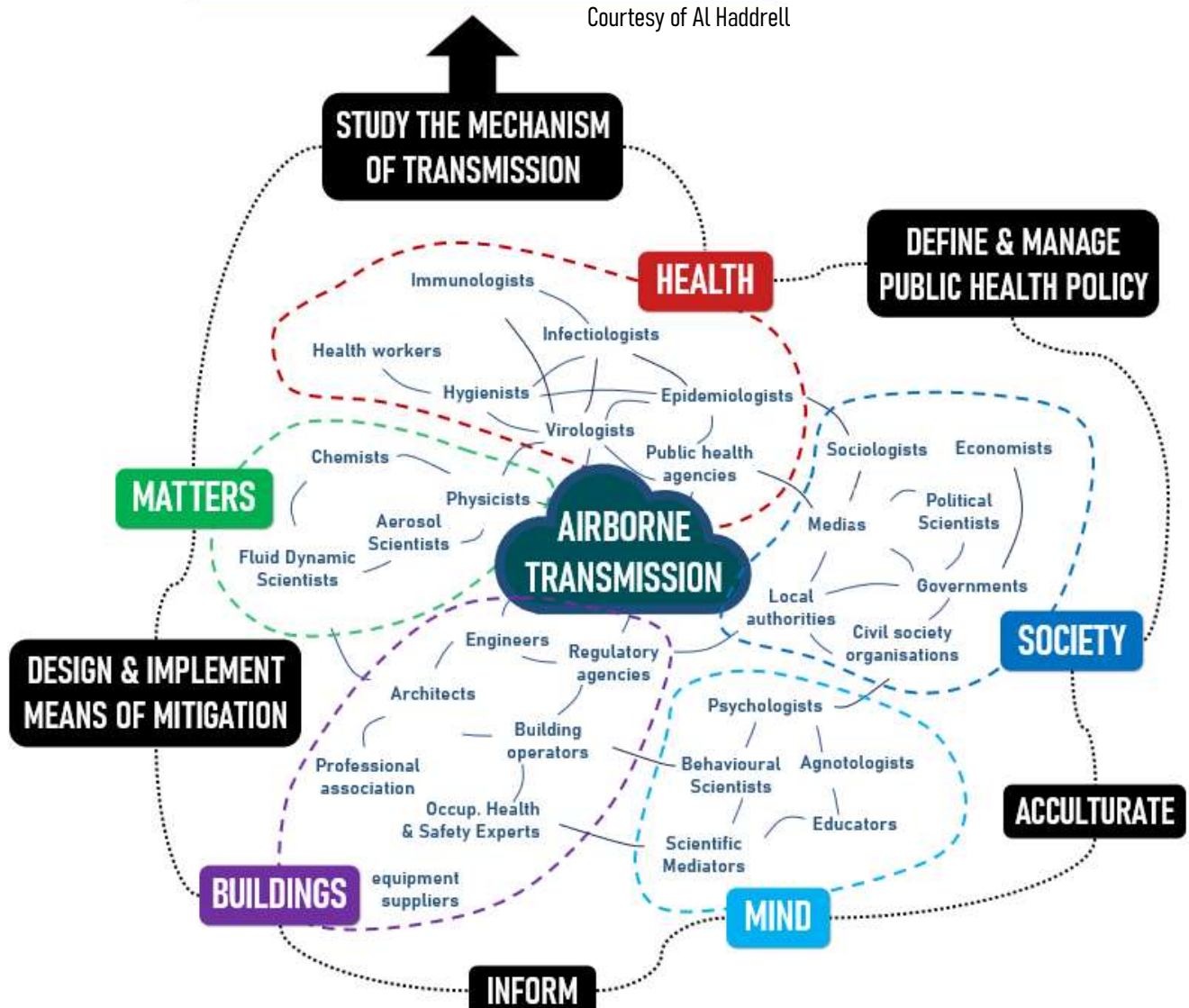


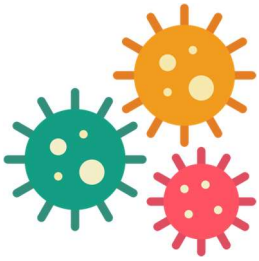
# TOWARDS A SYSTEMIC VIEW OF AIRBORNE TRANSMISSION

The study and prevention of airborne diseases is undoubtedly a system of great complexity with a very large number of stakeholders and interactions. A systemic approach seems to us to be definitively essential to frame and structure any action in this area.



Courtesy of Al Haddrell

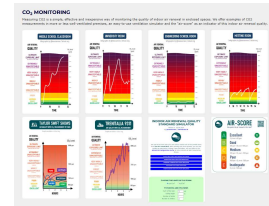




# FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

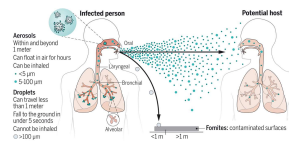
## [letsair.org](https://letsair.org)

This is our website with information and infographics on CO<sub>2</sub> monitoring, ventilation and air filtration.



## [Chia C. Wang et al. paper](#)

An excellent introduction to airborne transmission of respiratory viruses



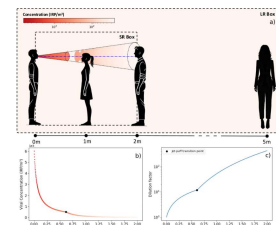
## [Al Haddrell's YouTube Channel](#)

This aerosol scientist offers short, clear and accessible instructional videos to help you understand the many scientific aspects of airborne transmission and aerosol inhalation.



## [Andre Henriques et al. paper](#)

A very clear and didactic article on the risks of airborne contamination. If you want to know more about aerosol science and simulation models, we recommend you start with this article.



## [Pr Clive Beggs hearing at UK COVID-19 inquiry](#)

During the hearing, Prof. Beggs described the difficulties of having inhalation transmission recognized as the main mode of contamination for COVID-19. He reports on the latest research in this field.



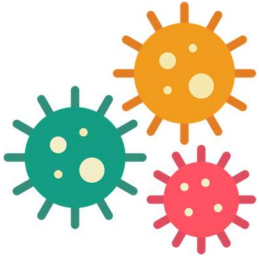
## [WHO report on proposed terminology](#)

The World Health Organization has published a document proposing a terminology for pathogens that transmit through the air. Our scientific mediation document, which you are now reading, attempts to be compatible with this report.

Mode of transmission	Typical respiratory droplet size (µm)	Typical infectious particle size (µm)	Respiratory tract entry mechanism	Respiratory tract exit point	Survival time
Large droplet transmission	> 5	> 5	Inhalation	Exhalation	Minutes
Aerosol transmission	< 5	< 5	Inhalation	Exhalation	Hours







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- [2] Iwamura N, Tsutsumi K. SARS-CoV-2 airborne infection probability estimated by using indoor carbon dioxide. *Environ Sci Pollut Res Int*. 2023 Jul;30(32):79227–79240. [doi.org/10.1007/s11356-023-27944-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11356-023-27944-9). Epub 2023 Jun 7. PMID: 37286835; PMCID: PMC10247268.
- [3] Zhang, Y., Nannu Shankar, S., Vass, W. B., Lednicky, J. A., Fan, Z. H., Agdas, D., ... Wu, C. Y. (2024). Air change rate and SARS-CoV-2 exposure in hospitals and residences: A meta-analysis. *Aerosol Science and Technology*, 58(3), 217–243. [doi.org/10.1080/02786826.2024.2312178](https://doi.org/10.1080/02786826.2024.2312178).
- [4] Ilias S. Frydas, Marianthi Kermenidou, Maria Karypidou, Spyros Karakitsios, Dimosthenis A. Sarigiannis, "SARS-CoV-2 airborne detection within different departments of a COVID-19 hospital building and evaluation of air cleaners in air viral load reduction", *Journal of Aerosol Science*, Volume 187, 2025, 106587, ISSN 0021-8502, [doi.org/10.1016/j.jaerosci.2025.106587](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaerosci.2025.106587).
- [5] Gupta, A., Madhavan, M.V., Sehgal, K. *et al*. Extrapulmonary manifestations of COVID-19. *Nat Med* 26, 1017–1032 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0968-3>