

1 **A secure and rapid query-software for COVID-19 test results**  
2 **that can easily be integrated into the clinical workflow to**  
3 **avoid communication overload**

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## 26 Abstract

27 Overcoming the COVID-19 crisis requires new ideas and strategies. Rapid testing of a large number of  
28 subjects is essential to monitor, and delay, the spread of SARS-CoV-2 to mitigate the consequences of the  
29 pandemic. People not knowing that they are infected may not stay in quarantine and, thus, are a risk for  
30 infecting others. Unfortunately, the massive number of COVID-19 tests performed is challenging for both  
31 laboratories and the units that take the throat swab and have to communicate test results. Here, we  
32 present a secure tracking system (CTest) to report COVID-19 test results online as soon as they become  
33 available. The system can be integrated into the clinical workflow with very modest effort and avoids  
34 excessive load to telephone hotlines. With this open-source and browser-based online tracking system, we  
35 aim to minimize the time required to inform the tested person but also the test units, e.g. hospitals or the  
36 public healthcare system. Instead of personal calls, CTest updates the status of the test automatically  
37 when the test results are available. Test reports are published on a secured web-page enabling regular  
38 status checks also by patients not using smartphones with dedicated mobile apps which has some  
39 importance as smartphone usage diminishes with age.

40 The source code, as well as further information to integrate CTest into the IT environment of other clinics  
41 or test-centres, are freely available from <https://github.com/sysbio-bioinf/CTest> under the Eclipse Public  
42 License v2.0 (EPL2).

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## 49 Introduction

50 After the first outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan (Hubei province, China) in December 2019, the has been  
51 spreading rapidly around the world [1]. Thus, the management of its induced crisis has become a  
52 ubiquitous topic [2]. Each day, the number of new infections increases dramatically worldwide reaching  
53 globally 1,276,302 confirmed cases on the April 4th 2020 (9:28 AM) [3] with a median age of 51 years [1].  
54 The most common test for COVID-19 infections is to take a throat swab and test by real-time polymerase  
55 chain reaction (RT-PCR) [1,4].

56 Infected persons can spread the virus before the first symptoms appear [5,6]. Timely communication of  
57 results is thus essential to take appropriate action, but challenging due to the throughput and the often  
58 demanding circumstances tests are carried out. Current practice in Germany is to call the respective clinic  
59 or laboratory for information about test results. This process ties up considerable resources and does not  
60 scale well for large numbers of tests. Communication channels become overloaded due to repeated calls  
61 of the testees and waiting times as well as anxiety of the testee's increase.

62 To accelerate the COVID-19 test procedure, we implemented an online query system, called CTest. It  
63 empowers testees since they can check their test result status independently through a convenient, secure  
64 online system (see Fig 1) [7]. The approach avoids unnecessary and repeated phone calls, manual  
65 transcription errors, and consequently reduces the burden on the clinical staff.

66

### 67 **Fig 1. Workflow of the COVID-19 test process using CTest.**

68 First, COVID-19 swab tests are extracted. The test is then added to the CTest system via an order number. Based on  
69 this order number CTest generates a cryptographically secure tracking-ID. An information sheet with a test-specific  
70 weblink is generated by CTest and can be handed over to the person tested. After laboratory analysis is complete, the  
71 results are sent to CTest. CTest updates the test results that can be queried via the individual web link.

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74 The CTest system extends the previously developed online tracking tool TraqBio [8]. This application was  
75 created to simplify and standardise communication between users and CORE facilities. Its clean design  
76 and the open-source license allow development (refactoring), deployment, establishment, and integration  
77 of CTest within a short period of time.

78 CTest runs on the Java Virtual Machine [8,9]. The web application can be deployed independently of  
79 operating system and platform.

80

## 81 **Methods**

82 **Implementation and setup.** We based the CTest application on the TraqBio software [8]. Backend  
83 functionality of the CTest server is implemented in the Lisp dialect Clojure. Clojure runs on the Java Virtual  
84 Machine [9] and is thus platform-independent. The backend comprises a database to store the scheduled  
85 COVID-19 tests and corresponding results. Clojure supports different databases and connectors. We  
86 choose SQLite (version 3.29.0) [10] to keep the setup independent of additional database servers. A local  
87 database file holds the data. Additionally, CTest provides functionality for user management and data  
88 backup.

89 Every new order number entered and supplied by the laboratory staff in the CTest system, generates a  
90 database entry with a unique identifier and unique tracking number. Here, this order number is used as the  
91 primary unambiguous identifier. CTest can be configured to append the current date to the order number  
92 to create a primary unambiguous identifier in setups where order numbers are only guaranteed to be  
93 unique within the same day. Using a secure random number generator, we generate a corresponding  
94 tracking number [11]. This random number generator generates six bytes which are then translated into a  
95 sequence of 12 characters between 0-9 and A-F. This sequence of characters is unique and not created in  
96 sequential order. Every tracking number generated is checked for uniqueness prior to use; there is no link  
97 between tracking and order number.

98 Web-frontend functionality is implemented using Javascript and HTML templates. We used freely  
99 available standard web frameworks like bootstrap (v3) [12, 13], jQuery [14] and extensions to these  
100 frameworks. Using these state-of-the-art frameworks, we aim to enable a straight-forward adaptation of  
101 the frontend for integration at other institutions. The frontend features a responsive graphical user  
102 interface for the management functions, the creation of tests and, accessibility for users to their test  
103 results. The test status can be queried via a unique weblink without requiring an account or login.

104 To secure web communication, creation, and queuing our setup consists of different security layers. Only  
105 Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) certified access to the websites is allowed via Hypertext Transfer Protocol  
106 Secure (HTTPS). Connection and transferred data are encrypted, and the CA-signed server certificates are  
107 used. A reverse proxy setup forwards the external hostname to a virtual machine within the hospital's  
108 secured network infrastructure. On the virtual server, another reverse proxy is in place to allow running the  
109 Java application as a non-privileged user. As the standard http port 80 is privileged, it can only be used by a  
110 system user. So, running the application as a user with system-wide rights is a security risk. Therefore,  
111 proxy settings forward the privileged port to a high port (above 1024), that normal users can control.  
112 Hence, no system rights are necessary for managing the application on the operating system level. For the  
113 setup in the clinical environment, we also set up a firewall with specific ban rules (iptables and fail2ban  
114 service on a Linux operating system) to prevent brute force attacks on login or tracking numbers. Also,  
115 network IPs and subnets can be white-listed to allow access to management functions of the application.  
116 Thus, other computers and devices are blocked from accessing these functions after failed attempts. For  
117 the tracking interface, a brute force attack (like trying all combinations of possible tracking numbers) is  
118 shielded by blocking IPs after too many failed attempts with wrong or non-existing tracking numbers.

119

120 **Query performance test.** For our performance test, we first performed 1024 simultaneous requests using  
121 a single machine and a single network connection. Next, we created a mixed dataset (interleaved\_urls),  
122 including 758 available database entries (available\_urls) and the same number of non-available tracking  
123 numbers (notavailable\_urls). Furthermore, we measured queries for always the same one or two URLs.  
124 That makes in total six datasets, each of which was accessed 1516 times. Queries were carried out once in  
125 sequence (ordered) and randomly (random). Also, the two scenarios caching function of the browser  
126 (1filePerRequest) and complete reloading (23or1filesPerRequest) were tested. Meaning that once  
127 unchanged files are not reloaded (caching), whereas in the other scenario, all required files and displayed  
128 images (e.g. flag-graphics or css) are reloaded. For the second scenario, one file is loaded if the tracking  
129 number is not available and 23 files if the tracking number is available. Stress tests were measured using  
130 Siege 4.0.4 [15].

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132

## 133 Results

134 CTest was built based on an existing, proven software stack (TraqBio [8]). It extends TraqBio to the  
135 functionality required for COVID-19 tests. We could successfully integrate it into the existing clinical  
136 testing workflows for SARS-CoV-2 infections in a major German university medical centre within a few  
137 days (Fig 2).

138

### 139 Fig 2. COVID-19 test procedure and set up.

140 (A) The left panel shows the detailed process flow of the COVID-19 tests. CTest (blue) is tightly integrated into the  
141 test process (green). After the swab test for COVID-19, each test is included in the CTest database via a test-specific  
142 order number. An order number, e.g. from a laboratory information system, is used to generate a cryptographically  
143 secure tracking-ID. CTest then automatically creates a test-specific information sheet for each testee. This sheet  
144 contains a test-specific weblink and QR-code, based on the tracking-ID. The URL does not provide any information  
145 which allows for tracking back the test results to the corresponding testee. After the analysis in the laboratory, results  
146 are transmitted to the CTest server. CTest automatically updates the status on the test-specific weblink based on the  
147 corresponding test results.

148 (B) In the right panel, a possible integration scenario of CTest into a clinical infrastructure is shown. CTest runs on a  
149 virtual machine within the secured network of a university hospital. The external hostname with web links to the  
150 testee's statuses is forwarded via reverse proxy. A second reverse proxy forwards the port to the application to a non-  
151 privileged port. Thus, the application does not need to run with a system user. The test unit inside the hospital's  
152 network communicates to the CTest server to create new test cases via an order number. The CTest sever returns  
153 back the tracking number and the corresponding weblink/QR-Code. The laboratory pushes test results as comma-  
154 separated-value format (CSV) files to the CTest server. The test-specific web page content is then updated according  
155 to the test result.

156

157 The workflow starts with taking a sample for testing. In a first step, an order number is generated by the  
158 testing lab and added as a barcode label to the sample. Analogous to other medical applications, order  
159 numbers within the laboratory information system of the clinical information system are unique but do not  
160 contain personal information about the patient [16]. This order number is transferred to the CTest system  
161 via scanning or typing the number into an input field of the dialogue window. We implemented format  
162 restrictions via regular expressions to the input field to minimize incorrect entries. Afterwards, CTest  
163 generates an unambiguous, non-consecutive tracking number. Therefore, a cryptographically strong  
164 pseudo-random number generator [11] creates six bytes that are transferred into a twelve-digit character

165 code, including letters A-F and numbers from 0 to 9. Using this tracking number ensures that no personal  
166 information about any testee can be inferred.

167 After taking the sample, the tracking number is given to each testee on a printed sheet, including  
168 information on how to access the status of their COVID-19 test (Fig 3A). After the sample has been  
169 processed, the lab system sends update files as a comma-separated-value (CSV) file via secure encrypted  
170 file transfer protocol-connection (SFTP) to the CTest server. Results in the CSV file are then automatically  
171 parsed, backed up, and imported into the database of CTest which leads to a fully automated update of  
172 the status of each processed test.

173 Currently, the CTest system distinguishes two potential outcomes: 1) the COVID-19 test is negative (Fig  
174 3B) or 2) still in progress (Fig 3C). Positive results are mapped to "in progress". Personal phone calls from  
175 the health department will inform people who are tested positive for SARS-CoV-2. Thereby they can be  
176 informed about health arrangements and how to avoid further spreading of the virus.

177 We provide two possibilities to query the status of the COVID-19 test. Either it is possible to scan a QR  
178 code on the received information letter with a smartphone to get redirected to a test status webpage (Fig  
179 3D) or to enter this weblink into a web browser directly. The status of the individual test result is  
180 automatically displayed in a responsive form on the device (Fig 3D). Currently, we observe that both  
181 possibilities to request the test results are used. 30.6% of people prefer a query of the test results via a web  
182 browser while the rest of testees scan the provided QR-code.

183

#### 184 **Fig 3. Information for testees.**

185 Information concerning the access to the test status and its results are given in eight languages. (A) The information  
186 sheet that is handed over to testees. It informs how to access the COVID-19 test results online. The test-specific URL  
187 links to a page which includes information about negative test result (B) or that the test is still in progress (C).  
188 Scanning the QR code with a smartphone forwards directly to the current test status or its result (D).  
189

190 To overcome language barriers, information concerning the procedure to obtain test results and the  
191 results were translated into eight languages, including German, English, French, Turkish, Italian, Russian,  
192 Chinese, and Arabic.

193 Due to the high number of tests being administered during the peak times of infection waves, CTest was  
194 designed to handle large numbers of queries in a short amount of time. Since the introduction of CTest

195 into the clinical routine, we detect around 12 queries per performed test (Fig 4A). Handling of all these  
196 requests by phone calls would lead to communication overload. Consequently, CTest can reduce the  
197 burden on clinical staff.

198 Additionally, we checked its performance and robustness in load tests (Fig 4B and S1-S6 Figs). Our CTest  
199 server can respond within 200 ms to over 80% of requests and within 500 ms to over 90% when doing up  
200 to 1024 simultaneous requests (Fig 4B). Furthermore, we performed stress tests with available and  
201 unavailable tracking numbers (S1-S6 Figs). Based on these tests, we are confident that CTest is well-suited  
202 to the demands of rapid testing even if deployed in an ad hoc manner on standard hardware. Its platform  
203 independence allows its deployment on a wide variety of (existing) infrastructures.

204

205 **Fig 4. Requests to the CTest server.**

206 (A) Since its introduction in the routine of the University Hospital Ulm (Germany), a mean of 12 views per test was  
207 recorded (for March 26th only the last 3.5 hours were recorded). (B) The server can respond within 200 ms to >80% of  
208 requests when doing up to 1024 simultaneous requests. In this simulation, requests were made using a single  
209 machine and a single network connection.

210

211 Another feature of CTest is its functionality for error reporting and statistics. A dedicated "reporter"  
212 account is required to access the reporting data. Here, all data is provided in the machine-readable JSON  
213 format and the path `"/reports/list"` can be accessed to get a list of information and error reports. The  
214 included information is about the successful backup runs and successful test status imports from CSV files.  
215 Also, the number of test results views per day can be accessed at `"/reports/views"`. General system  
216 information such as memory consumption and CPU usage are available at `"/reports/system"`. Furthermore,  
217 the sample collection dates are available `"/reports/test-dates"` for analysis.

218 We present CTest with a web interface. In addition to its web interface, CTest facilitates the access of  
219 third-party software (apps), if the testee decides to use these. These apps can query the status using the  
220 tracking link with appended `?app=true` which returns only the test status "negative" or "in progress"  
221 instead of the complete HTML document.

222

223



## 224 Discussion

225 The primary goal of this approach was to reduce the burden of clinical staff in the COVID-19 crisis.  
226 Furthermore, we wanted to empower the testees to obtain their results in a facile and easy to access way  
227 while at the same time ensuring efficient and almost instantaneous and exclusive communication.  
228 Speedy communication is essential in the current crisis, as virus carriers can be infectious before first  
229 symptoms arise and as tested people are worried until they know the result of their test [5,6]  
230 Not knowing the outcome might tempt testees not to act accordingly and thus increase the risk of  
231 infecting others. Therefore, CTest might help to contribute to reducing virus spreading and also can help  
232 to reduce the mental stress of the testees.  
233 First analyses of CTest in the clinical routine showed a mean of 12 queries per performed test. Even half of  
234 that number of telephone inquiries would lead to communication overload. Consequently, the  
235 introduction of CTest into the clinical routine at the University Hospital Ulm could achieve our primary goal  
236 of reducing the burden on the clinical staff. Beneficial for this purpose was the open-source license of  
237 TraqBio and its clean and simple setup. This made it possible to implement and integrate the CTest system  
238 within a very short period (4 days) into the clinical workflow. Another advantage is that users do not have  
239 to create an account to request their test results.  
240 Currently, CTest is specialized for the query of COVID-19 test results and their status. However, it can be  
241 adapted with a moderate effort to other queries or the distribution of different types of test results. Even  
242 the integration of the CTest system into apps is possible if the html view presented here is not desired. For  
243 this purpose, the token "?app=true" has to be added after the tracking number.  
244 Tracking numbers for test results are created based on non-personalized order numbers. Thus, CTest does  
245 **not** use or store personal data that allows identification of people being tested. Based on this  
246 implementation, we address the challenges of big data in personalized medicine [7] and respect the  
247 German and European data protection law. Clinical or laboratory information systems are often closed-  
248 source, and development, adaption and integration of new interfaces can be time-consuming. As exploits

249 allow access to different types of sensitive data, we developed an independent, stand-alone software  
250 solution without storing personalized data.

251 We provide two possibilities (web page and QR-code) to query the status of the test results. The fact that  
252 around 30% of users query their test results with a web browser encourages us in this direction. CTest has  
253 already been successfully integrated into the clinical workflow at the University Hospital Ulm to keep  
254 tested persons updated.

255

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270

## 271 **Availability**

272 The source code, documentation, and an installation guide is freely available from  
273 <https://github.com/sysbio-bioinf/CTest> under the Eclipse Public License v2.0 (EPL2).

274

## 275 **Author contributions:**

276 Funding acquisition: KAK, OK, PK, TS, HAK.

277 Project administration: HAK.

278 Software: GV, AF, TG, JMK, AG, JDS.

279 Supervision: HAK.

280 Visualization: GV, AF, JDS, SDK.

281 Writing – original draft: JDS, SDK, AF, PK, OK, GV, HAK. Writing – review & editing: JDS, GV, FK, KAK,

282 SDK, OK, TS, HAK.

283

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## 319 **Supporting information**

320 **S1 Fig. Stress test with available URLs.** Queries were measured for 758 available database entries  
321 (available\_urls) in the CTest system, which were accessed 1516 times sequentially (ordered) and randomly  
322 (random). Furthermore, tests were performed for the caching function of the browser (1filePerRequest)  
323 and complete reloading (23or1filesPerRequest) of the page.

324

325 **S2 Fig. Stress test with non-available URLs.** Queries were measured for 758 non-available database  
326 entries (notavailable\_urls) in the CTest system, which were accessed 1516 times once sequentially  
327 (ordered) and randomly (random). Furthermore, tests were performed for the caching function of the  
328 browser (1filePerRequest) and complete reloading (23or1filesPerRequest) of the page.

329

330 **S3 Fig. Stress test with a combination of available and non-available URLs.** Queries were measured for  
331 a mixed set of database entries (interleaved\_urls) including 758 available CTest entries and the same  
332 number non-available database entries which were accessed 1516 times once in sequence (ordered) and  
333 randomly (random). Furthermore, tests were performed for the caching function of the browser  
334 (1filePerRequest) and complete reloading (23or1filesPerRequest) of the page. This means that once  
335 unchanged files are not reloaded (caching), whereas in the other scenario, all required files and displayed  
336 images (e.g. flag-graphics or css) are reloaded. For the second scenario, one file is loaded if the tracking  
337 number is not available and 23 files if the tracking number is available.

338

339 **S4 Fig. Stress test with one available URL.** Queries were measured for one available URL  
340 (one\_available\_url) in the CTest system, which was accessed 1516 times once in sequence (ordered) and  
341 randomly (random). Furthermore, tests were performed for the caching function of the browser  
342 (1filePerRequest) and complete reloading (23or1filesPerRequest) of the page. This means that once  
343 unchanged files are not reloaded (caching), whereas in the other scenario, all required files and displayed  
344 images (e.g. flag-graphics or css) are reloaded. For the second scenario, one file is loaded if the tracking  
345 number is not available and 23 files if the tracking number is available.

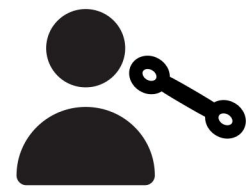
346

347 **S5 Fig. Stress test with one non-available URL.** Queries were measured for one not available URL  
348 (one\_notavailable\_url) in the CTest system, which was accessed 1516 times once in sequence (ordered)  
349 and randomly (random). Furthermore, tests were performed for the caching function of the browser  
350 (1filePerRequest) and complete reloading (23or1filesPerRequest) of the page. This means that once  
351 unchanged files are not reloaded (caching), whereas in the other scenario, all required files and displayed

352 images (e.g. flag-graphics or css) are reloaded. For the second scenario, one file is loaded if the tracking  
353 number is not available and 23 files if the tracking number is available.

354

355 **S6 Fig. Stress test with two URL.** Queries were measured for two URLs (1 available and one not available;  
356 two\_interleaved\_url) in the CTest system, which was accessed 1516 times once in sequence (ordered) and  
357 randomly (random). Furthermore, tests were performed for the caching function of the browser  
358 (1filePerRequest) and complete reloading (23or1filesPerRequest) of the page. This means that once  
359 unchanged files are not reloaded (caching), whereas in the other scenario, all required files and displayed  
360 images (e.g. flag-graphics or css) are reloaded. For the second scenario, one file is loaded if the tracking  
361 number is not available and 23 files if the tracking number is available



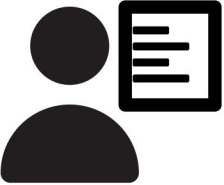
**COVID-19 Swab Test**



**Adding Test to CTest System**



**Hand Information Sheet to tested Person /  
Generate test-specific weblink**

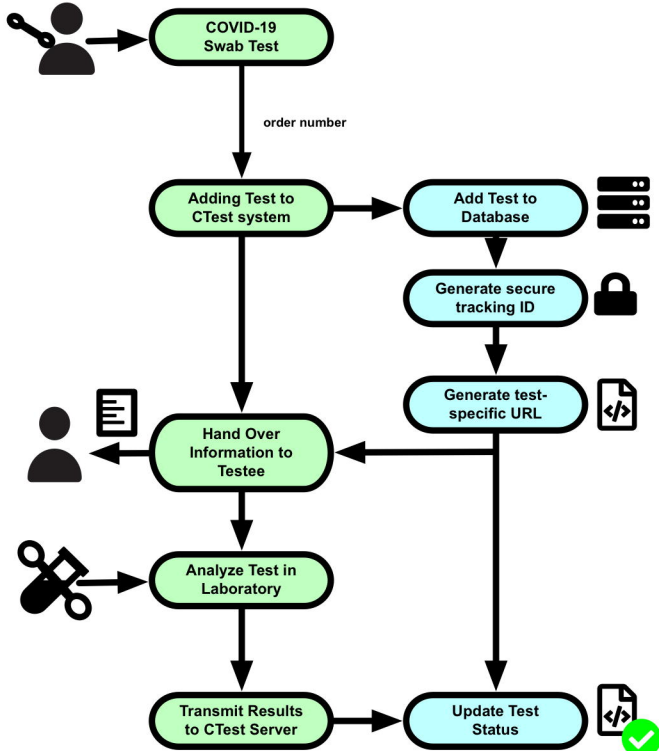


**Test Analysis in Laboratory**

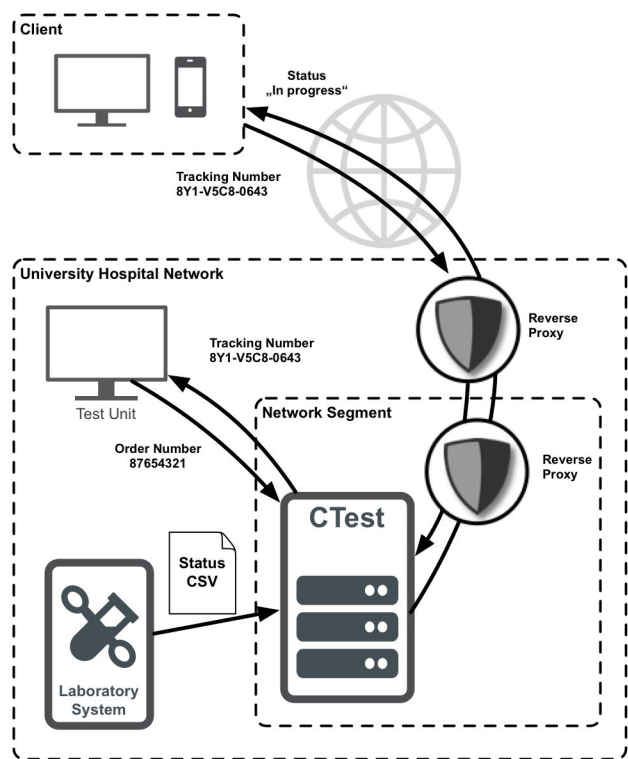


**Publish Test Status**


A



B





	Um Ihnen einen einfachen und möglichst schnellen Zugriff auf den Status Ihres Tests zu geben, haben wir einen Internetdienst eingerichtet. Sie haben direkten Zugriff auf den Status Ihres Tests über folgende Internetadresse:
	To provide you a quick and easy access to your test result we set up a dedicated internet service. You can reach your personal test result using following website:
	Pour vous offrir un service simple et rapide pour l'accès votre test, nous avons ouvert un service direct via l'adresse Internet suivante:
	Testinizin sonucuna kolay ve hızlı bir şekilde erişebilmeniz için bir internet hizmeti kurduk. Aşağıdaki internet adresi aracılığıyla testinizin sonucuna doğrudan erişebilirsiniz:
	Al fine di fornire un veloce e facile accesso al risultato del test, abbiamo messo a punto un servizio internet dedicato. È possibile avere accesso al proprio risultato utilizzando il seguente sito:
	Мы устроили интернет-сервис, чтобы вы могли просто и быстро получить доступ к статусу вашего теста. Прямой доступ к статусу вашего теста по следующему интернет-адресу:
	为了快速方便地访问您的测试状态，我们实施了一项互联网服务。您可以通过以下网站直接访问测试状态。:
	لقد انشأنا لك خدمة إنترنت لتمنحك وصولاً سهلاً وسريعاً إلى حالة و نتيجة الاختبار. لديك امكانية الوصول المباشر إلى النتيجة عبر الإنترنت من خلال الموقع الإلكتروني التالي:

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<https://ctest.server.de/track/48Y1-V5C8-0643>



## C Tracking Nr. 48Y1-V5C8-0643

### Status

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
|  | Analyse läuft            |
|  | Test in progress         |
|  | Analyse en cours         |
|  | Analiz devam ediyor      |
|  | Analisi in corso         |
|  | Анализ в обработке       |
|  | 正在分析中                    |
|  | ولا يزال التحليل مستمرًا |

## D



## B Tracking Nr. 48Y1-V5C8-0643

### Status

#### Test negativ

Hinweis: ein negatives Ergebnis schließt die Möglichkeit einer Coronavirus-Infektion nicht vollständig aus (z.B. bei Probenabnahme zu früh während des Infektionsverlaufs).



#### Result negative

Information: a negative test result does not entirely exclude a coronavirus infection (e.g. in case samples were obtained too early after infection).



#### Test négatif

Remarque: un résultat négatif n'exclut pas entièrement la possibilité d'une infection avec le coronavirus (par exemple, si des échantillons sont prélevés trop tôt au cours de l'infection).



#### Negatif test

Not: negatif bir sonuç, koronavirüs enfeksiyonu olasılığını tamamen dışlamaz (örneğin, enfeksiyon sırasında örnek çok erken alınırsa).



#### Test negativo

Nota: un risultato negativo non esclude completamente la possibilità di un'infezione da coronavirus (ad es. Se il campione viene prelevato troppo presto nel corso dell'infezione).



#### Тест отрицательный

Примечание: отрицательный результат не полностью исключает возможность коронавирусной инфекции (например, если образец был взят слишком рано в течение инфекции).



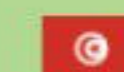
#### 测试结果阴性

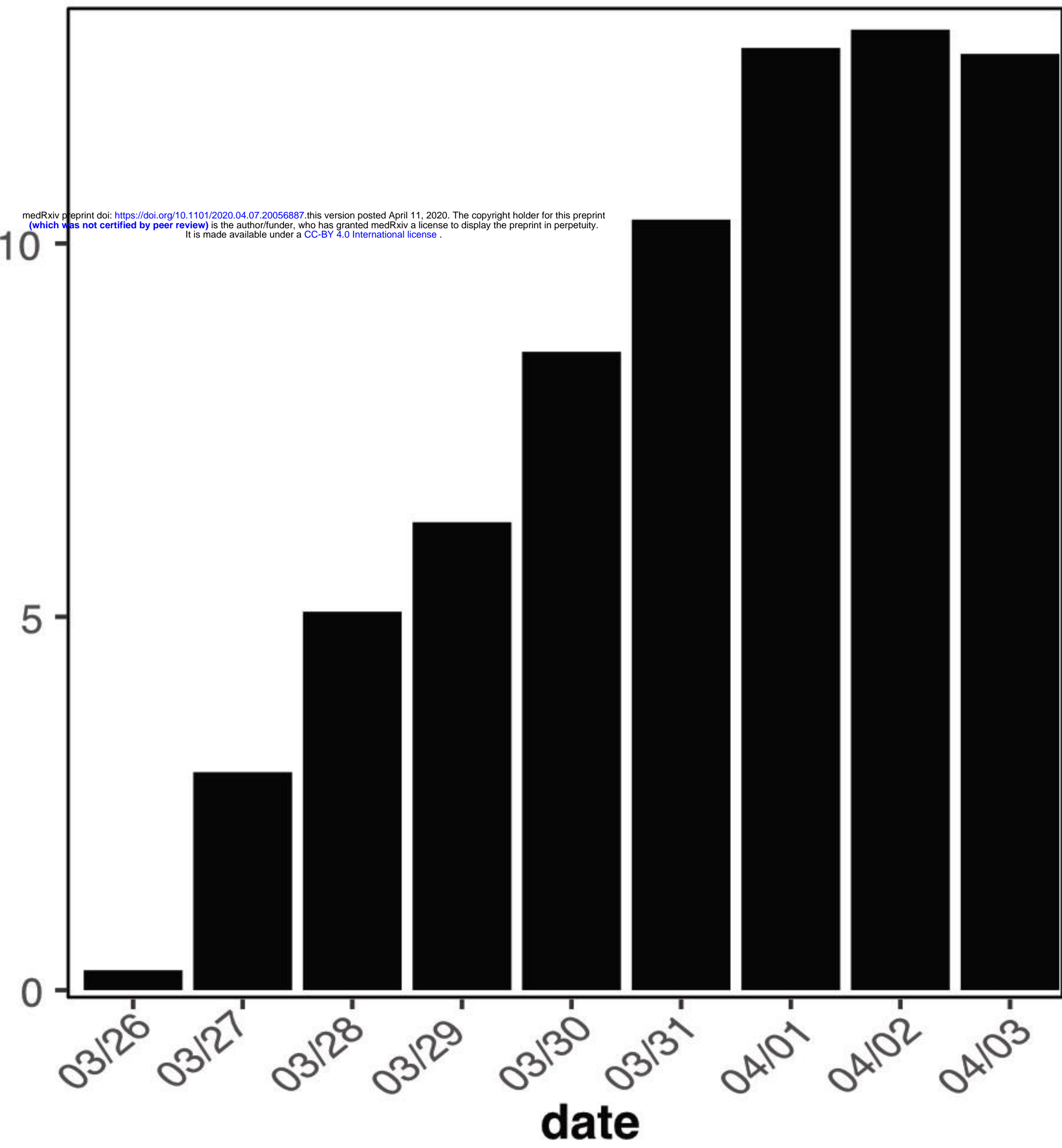
注意：阴性结果并未完全排除冠状病毒感染的可能性（例如，在感染过程中过早取样）。



#### النتيجة سلبية

ملاحظة: النتيجة السلبية لا تلغي تمامًا احتمالية الإصابة بالفيروس كورونا (على سبيل المثال إذا تم أخذ العينة في وقت مبكر جدًا من تقدم الإصابة).



**A****mean num views per entry****B****Total time per request [ms]**