We developed an assay that detects minus-strand RNA as a surrogate for actively replicating severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2. We detected minus-strand RNA in 41 persons with coronavirus disease up to 30 days after symptom onset. This assay might inform clinical decision-making about patient infectiousness.

Real-time reverse transcription PCR (rRT-PCR) is the standard diagnostic method for coronavirus disease 2019, but it cannot differentiate between actively replicating and inactive virus. Active replication is a critical factor for infectiousness; however, its time course is difficult to estimate because of the typical 20–50 days before rRT-PCR negative conversion occurs (1,2). PCR cycle threshold (Ct) values might help physicians to determine a patient’s infectiousness, but researchers have isolated replicating virus from patients with a wide range (28–33) of Ct values (3–7). Given the stringent biosafety precautions needed for viral culturing of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), physicians require additional diagnostic tools. Actively replicating virus produces minus-strand RNA intermediates that can be detected by PCR (8,9). We developed and validated a 2-step strand-specific rRT-PCR for the detection of actively replicating SARS-CoV-2 and assessed its clinical performance.

The Study
We conducted standard nucleic acid and amplification testing at the Stanford Health Care Clinical Virology Laboratory (Stanford, CA, USA) using the Panther Fusion SARS-CoV-2 Assay (Hologic Inc., https://www.hologic.com), the Panther Aptima SARS-CoV-2 Assay (Hologic Inc.), or the in-house rRT-PCR specific to the SARS-CoV-2 envelope gene (permitted by Emergency Use Authorization) (10,11). We did not culture SARS-CoV-2 because we did not have access to a biosafety level 3 laboratory.

We developed a novel 2-step rRT-PCR specific to the minus strand of the envelope gene (Appendix, https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/EID/article/27/2/20-4168-App1.pdf). First, we used strand-specific primers to convert SARS-CoV-2 RNA to complementary DNA. Then, we amplified the complementary DNA by rRT-PCR in 3 separate positive, negative, and background (no primer) reactions using the Rotor-Gene Q instrument (QIAGEN, https://www.qiagen.com) (Appendix). We conducted the analytical validation during May–June 2020. We used in vitro transcribed minus- and plus-strand RNA to evaluate the linearity, precision, and lower limit of detection of the assay (Appendix).

We retrospectively collected a convenience set of upper respiratory specimens with a broad range of Ct values. These samples had been collected and frozen from 93 inpatients and outpatients who were treated at Stanford Health Care and tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 during March 12–April 9, 2020. We also reviewed the electronic medical records of the participating patients. For the prospective phase of the study, we collected upper respiratory samples from 53 consecutive patients with confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection by standard rRT-PCR during July 31–September 4, 2020 (Appendix). Treating physicians ordered strand-specific rRT-PCR on the basis of clinical need; we used samples from these patients in the prospective phase.

We conducted analytical validation (12) and statistical analysis using Stata version 15.1 (StataCorp LLC., https://www.stata.com) (Appendix). We considered a 2-tailed p<0.05 to be significant. This study was approved by the Stanford Institutional Review Board (protocol no. 48973).

In total, we analyzed specimens from 146 patients: 93 in the retrospective phase and 53 in the prospective
phase (Appendix Tables 3, 4). The median age was 50 years (interquartile range 36–63 years); 73 (50.0%) were women, 26 (17.8%) were immunocompromised, and 30 (20.5%) were admitted to the intensive care unit for coronavirus disease during the course of the study (Table 1). Samples were collected a median of 9 days (interquartile range 4-18 days) after symptom onset (Figure 1, panel A). We detected minus-strand RNA in 41 (28.1%) patients. The median C<sub>t</sub> value of samples with detected minus-strand RNA (20.7) was significantly lower than those in which the minus strand was not detected (33.2; p<0.01) (Figure 1, panel B). The results of this strand-specific assay were closely correlated with the standard rRT-PCR results (Figure 2, panels A, B). The ratio of minus:plus strands varied by patient within 14 days after symptom onset (Appendix Figure 2).

We detected the minus strand in 7 patients in the prospective cohort (Table 1, https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/EID/article/27/2/20-4168-T1.htm). Two of these patients were nonimmunocompromised inpatients tested >10 days after symptom onset, including 1 who had been asymptomatic for >48 hours; the C<sub>t</sub> values for these samples were 39.0 and 38.6. We detected minus-strand SARS-CoV-2 RNA up to 30 days after symptom onset in an immunocompromised patient with persistent fever. For 2 patients in the prospective cohort, a negative result might have facilitated the approval of medical procedures despite prolonged positive results by standard rRT-PCR (Appendix).

**Conclusions**

We described the performance of a 2-step strand-specific rRT-PCR for detection of SARS-CoV-2. The assay identified viral replication in patients with persistent positive results by standard rRT-PCR, possibly facilitating clinical decision-making.

Other assays that assess intermediates of viral replication, such as subgenomic RNA, have emerged in the literature (5,13). Perera et al. demonstrated high correlation between levels of presumptive SARS-CoV-2 active replication intermediates and standard rRT-PCR C<sub>t</sub> values (13). The standard SARS-CoV-2 rRT-PCR is appropriate for most routine clinical diagnostic applications. However, because this assay does not determine whether SARS-CoV-2 is actively replicating, it cannot infer infectiousness in samples with mid-level C<sub>t</sub> values (i.e., C<sub>t</sub> 25-35).

We detected minus-strand RNA up to 30 days after symptom onset, which is longer than the 14-day period previously reported for subgenomic RNA (13).
and an 8–15 day period for viral culture (3–6,13). We detected minus-strand RNA in 2 patients beyond the typical period recommended for isolation. Isolation strategies on the basis of time and symptoms are simple to apply, reduce the number of tests that need to be conducted, thus saving resources, and are probably effective at a population level (14). However, it can be challenging to determine the infectiousness of patients in certain clinical contexts, such as immunocompromised hosts with persistent viral shedding, on the basis of time and symptoms alone. Tools such as strand-specific RNA testing might be helpful in determining the infectiousness of these patients. Strand-specific testing might also help avoid delays in required procedures or treatments such as chemotherapy, which might be postponed because of SARS-CoV-2–positive PCR results.

This study has several strengths, including a large patient cohort and analytical validation. This strand-specific assay is useful because it can be adapted for routine clinical laboratory testing, does not require emergency use authorization, and reports Ct values and strand-specific RNA detection. The study was limited by its single-center design and combination of 2 patient cohorts chosen using different selection techniques. The assay lacks viral culture data and is hampered by longer turnaround time and complexity. In future studies, we will validate this assay against SARS-CoV-2 viral culture and within a household transmission study.

In summary, we described the test performance and clinical feasibility of a strand-specific rRT-PCR assay for SARS-CoV-2. Strand-specific rRT-PCR testing might be especially useful in patients with prolonged RNA shedding. It might also supplement existing strategies for estimating infectiousness on the basis of time and symptoms. Further work is required to correlate these findings with viral culture, compare different strand-specific RNA detection methods, and to assess clinical utility in large and longitudinal patient cohorts. These findings might improve understanding of the infectiousness of SARS-CoV-2, enabling optimization of infection control measures and resource use.

Acknowledgments
We thank the staff from the Stanford Clinical Virology Laboratory for their testing of samples.

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Strand-Specific Reverse Transcription PCR for Detection of Replicating SARS-CoV-2

Appendix

Routine SARS-CoV-2 Testing

All testing was performed at the Stanford Clinical Virology Laboratory (Stanford, CA, USA), a laboratory in northern California that serves 2 academic medical centers and affiliated clinics in the surrounding area. Standard clinical testing of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) from respiratory samples was performed by the emergency use authorization for real-time reverse transcription PCR (rRT-PCR) specific to the SARS-CoV-2 envelope (E) gene, or with 1 of 2 commercial nucleic acid amplification test assays, the Panther Fusion SARS-CoV-2 (Hologic Inc., https://www.hologic.com), as previously described (1), or the Panther Aptima SARS-CoV-2 (Hologic Inc.). The range of cycle threshold values for the rRT-PCR assays was <20 cycles to 45 cycles, and samples with a cycle threshold (Ct) value >40 were repeated and considered positive if reproducible. Results from the Panther Aptima assay were not included for analysis in the Ct comparison of this study because only a few patients were tested with this assay and the lack of robust correlation between Ct values and relative light units.

Two-Step Strand-Specific PCR

RNA extraction was performed from 400µL of respiratory specimen using the EZ1 instrument (QIAGEN, https://www.qiagen.com). Strand-specific PCR testing consisted of 2 sets of reactions. In the first set of reactions, reverse transcription with strand-specific primers converted SARS-CoV-2 RNA to complementary DNA (cDNA). A reverse envelope (E) gene primer generated cDNA to the plus strand (rtR), comprising both genomic RNA and messenger RNA. In a separate reaction, a forward E gene reaction generated cDNA to the minus strand (rtF), comprising minus genomic and subgenomic RNA. A third reverse transcription reaction without an added primer was used as a control for each nucleic acid eluate (background (no
primer) reverse transcription reaction; rtX). In the second step, the cDNA was amplified by real-time PCR in 3 separate reactions using the Rotor-Gene Q instrument (QIAGEN) with the Stanford E gene assay.

The oligonucleotide sequences of the primers and probes are listed in Appendix Table 1. Each reaction contained 12μL of 2X reaction mix and 1.2μL of enzyme mix, both from the Luna Universal Probe One-Step RT-qPCR kit (New England Biolabs, Inc., https://www.neb.com), 2 μL of reverse transcription primers (rtF, rtR or rtX), and 10μL eluate. Reverse transcription (RT) was performed on the Veriti instrument (Thermo Fisher Scientific, https://www.thermofisher.com) for 15 minutes at 60°C, followed by RT inactivation for 10 minutes at 80°C. This corresponds to a time-based RT separation, rather than an enzyme-based RT separation. This modification was performed to maximize the eluate input volume into the PCR reaction. The reaction tubes were then removed from the thermal cycler, and 2μL of the Stanford EUA E gene assay primer/probe mix was added in the same tubes, as previously described (2). In the second step, the amplification step was resumed in the same reaction tube by real-time PCR (rRT-PCR) using the Rotor-Gene Q instrument (QIAGEN). Thermal cycling involved 2 minutes at 94°C, followed by 45 cycles of 15 seconds at 94°C, 40 seconds at 55°C, and 20 seconds at 68°C. Each run included a SARS-CoV-2-negative control (pooled nasopharyngeal specimens confirmed negative by standard SARS-CoV-2 rRT-PCR), and 2 positive controls (in vitro transcribed plus- and minus-strand RNA). The minus-strand target was reported as detected if the rtF reaction showed an exponential curve with a Ct <45 cycles, the rtX reaction was either not detected or detected ≥3 cycles later than the minus strand, and the rtR reaction was detected at a Ct less than that of the rtF reaction. Testing was performed as a laboratory-developed test for SARS-CoV-2 monitoring in a Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments–certified laboratory, and thus did not require emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration.

Analytical Validation

To perform the analytical validation, minus- and plus-strand SARS-CoV-2 RNA was in vitro transcribed using the HiScribe T7 Quick Yield RNA Synthesis kit (New England Biolabs, Inc.) to be used as strand-specific control material. In vitro transcription was performed from T7-containing primers (Appendix Table 1), and one amplicon was generated for each direction. The
preparations were purified by DNAse treatment followed by lithium chloride precipitation. The control RNA material was quantitated using the E gene assay with single-stranded DNA as standard. The control RNA material was run in triplicate from 6.0 to 1.0 log\textsubscript{10} copies/\mu L to evaluate linearity, and in triplicate at 10 and 100 copies/\mu L for 3 days to evaluate precision. The lower limit of detection (LLOD) was evaluated by testing 10 replicates each at 0.5, 1 and 2 copies/\mu L.

**Research Cohort Selection (Retrospective Phase)**

Patients whose initial strand-specific result was detected, and who had residual specimen leftover available from longitudinal samples, underwent repeat strand-specific testing. Repeat testing was not performed for individuals for whom initial strand-specific testing was negative. Specimens were stored at -80\degree C and thawed at the time of testing.

**Clinical Cohort Selection (Prospective Phase)**

Strand-specific rRT-PCR test results were reported in the electronic medical system. Results included the C\textsubscript{T} value of the minus and plus strands, along with the respective interpretation as ‘detected’ or ‘not detected’ for each. Comments were autoappended to each strand-specific result to provide additional guidance on result interpretation. For positive results, the comment included that this was consistent with active virus replication. For negative results, the comment included a caution on the inability to rule out active virus replication on the basis of the strand-specific test result alone. Patients for whom testing had been ordered in error instead of routine RT-PCR for initial diagnosis were excluded. Test results were included for clinical decision-making on a case-by-case basis with support from the Stanford Infection and Prevention Control Program, and were not formally integrated into institutional guidelines at the time of this study. Chart review was performed as for the retrospective phase.

**Statistical Analysis**

The 95% LLOD was calculated by probit analysis using R version 4.0.2 (The R Project for Statistical Computing, https://www.r-project.org). Precision analysis was performed in Microsoft Excel (https://www.microsoft.com) as previously described (15). Clinical data statistical analysis was performed by \chi^2 test or Fisher’s exact test when there were <5 datapoints per cell for categorical variables, or by the Mann-Whitney U test for continuous variables using
Results

Analytical Validation

The linear range extended from 1.0 to 6.0 log_{10} copies/μL for the minus and plus strands, with R^2 = 0.99 for both (Appendix Figure 1, panels A, B). Between-run and within-run precision showed coefficients of variation of <2% for both tested concentrations (Appendix Table 2). The 95% LLOD for the minus strand was calculated to be 0.5 RNA copies/μL (5 copies/reaction; 10/10 samples detected). Background signal was observed for all minus strand in vitro transcribed control material, with an average signal difference of 11.8 cycles between the minus strand and background. The background signal corresponded to valid amplification curves, which could not be distinguished from true positives. Additional DNAse treatment did not resolve this issue. Overall, these test performance characteristics were consistent with the performance seen with the Stanford E gene assay (B. Pinsky, unpub. data).

Clinical Results

The median C_t value from the standard nasopharyngeal rRT-PCR assay was 28.0 (interquartile range [IQR] 22.3–35.7) in the retrospective phase, and 33.4 (IQR 25.2–35.8) in the prospective phase, and the proportion of minus strand detection was significantly lower in the prospective phase (36.6% vs. 13.2%; p<0.01). A subset of 13 persons in the retrospective phase and 9 persons in the prospective phase underwent repeat strand-specific rRT-PCR testing, of whom a total of 4 tested positive for minus-strand RNA, up to 5 days after the first test. In the retrospective phase, background signal was detected in 8 (8.6%) of 93 samples, with a median C_t value of 39.3 (IQR 38.7–39.9) (Appendix Table 3). In contrast, no background signal was observed in the prospective clinical cohort testing (Appendix Table 4).

In 2 patients in the prospective cohort, a negative result for minus-strand RNA facilitated the approval to proceed with procedures in the context of persistently positive SARS-CoV-2 rRT-PCR results. The first case included approval to proceed with surgery for a woman 18 years...
of age for tumor investigation and management despite positive SARS-CoV-2 rRT-PCR results after >10 days of home isolation for coronavirus disease. The second case included facilitating approval to list an immunocompromised woman 56 years of age for organ transplant after >50 days of rRT-PCR positivity. Both of these presented with positive Aptima results, 1,135 and 1,027 relative light units, respectively.

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Appendix Table 1. Strand-specific PCR primer and probe specifications in study on strand-specific reverse transcription PCR specific for detection of replicating severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, California, USA, 2020*

| Name                     | Concentration, nmol/L | Sequence (5’→3’)                   |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| Reverse transcription primers |                       |                                    |
| nCoVsg_E.rtF             | 400                   | CGAACTTATGTACTCAATCGTTTCGG         |
| nCoVsg_E.rtR             | 400                   | AGAAGGTTTACAGACTCAGTT             |
| E gene real-time PCR primers |                       |                                    |
| SARS-CoV-2_E_Fwd         | 400                   | ACAGGTACGTTAATAGTTAATACGCT        |
| SARS-CoV-2_E_Rev         | 400                   | ATATGCTACGGATACGACGCAACCA         |
| RNase P Forward          | 200                   | AGATTGGACCTGGCGAGCG               |
| RNase P Reverse          | 200                   | GAGCGGTGCTTCACACAGT               |
| E gene real-time PCR probes |                       |                                    |
| SARS-CoV-2_E_Prb-FAM     | 200                   | AACTAGCCTCTTACTGGCGTTCG           |
| RNase P CI-560           | 500                   | TCCTGACCTGAAGGCTCGCCG             |
| In vitro transcription primers |                       |                                    |
| nCoVsg_E.FO.T7           | 400                   | TAATACGACTTCATAGG                 |
| nCoVsg_E.RO              | 400                   | CTTGTGAACGACAGCTGAGT             |
| nCoVsg_E.FO              | 400                   | CCAGAAGATCAGAAGCTGAGA             |
| nCoVsg_E.Ro.T7           | 400                   | CTTTGACGCAAGCAGTGTAGT             |

*E gene, envelope gene; SARS-CoV-2, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2; Rtf, forward envelope gene reaction; Rr, reverse envelope gene reaction.
### Appendix Table 2.

Run results of study on strand-specific real-time reverse transcription PCR specific for detection of replicating severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, California, USA, 2020*

| RNA            | Mean cycle threshold value | Within run† | Between run‡ | Total SD CV, % | SD CV, % | SD CV, % | SD CV, % |
|----------------|----------------------------|-------------|--------------|----------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Minus strand, cp/µL |                            |             |              |                |          |          |          |
| 100            | 30.7                       | 0.15        | 0.49         | 0.52           | 1.70     | 0.54     | 1.75     |
| 10             | 34.1                       | 0.30        | 0.87         | 0.53           | 1.54     | 0.58     | 1.70     |
| Plus strand, cp/µL |                            |             |              |                |          |          |          |
| 100            | 29.3                       | 0.33        | 1.12         | 0.40           | 1.36     | 0.48     | 1.64     |
| 10             | 32.8                       | 0.22        | 0.68         | 0.27           | 0.81     | 0.32     | 0.98     |

*cp/µL, copies per microliter; CV: coefficient of variation.
†The control RNA material was run in triplicate at 10 copies/µL and 100 copies/µL each day for 3 days to evaluate precision. Each run included a negative control (0cp/µL); the results of the negative control were not detected.

### Appendix Table 3.

Full results of the strand-specific real-time reverse transcription PCR for retrospective clinical samples from patients with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, California, USA, 2020*

| Patient ID | Sample type | Background | Cycle threshold values | Cycle threshold by standard PCR† |
|------------|-------------|------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1          | NP          | ndet       | 32.6                   | 16.6                             |
| 2          | NP          | ndet       | 37.4                   | 23.5                             |
| 3          | NP          | ndet       | 30.4                   | 15.7                             |
| 4          | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | ndet                             |
| 5          | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | ndet                             |
| 6          | NP          | ndet       | 37.8                   | 24.9                             |
| 7          | NP          | ndet       | 36.0                   | 21.3                             |
| 8          | NP          | ndet       | 31.7                   | 31.7                             |
| 9          | NP          | ndet       | 34.0                   | 19.4                             |
| 10         | NP          | ndet       | 39.2                   | 22.2                             |
| 11         | NP          | 39.0       | ndet                   | ndet                             |
| 12         | NP          | ndet       | 34.9                   | 18.9                             |
| 13         | NP          | ndet       | 32.4                   | 17.0                             |
| 14         | NP          | ndet       | 34.1                   | 17.5                             |
| 15         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | ndet                             |
| 16         | NP          | ndet       | 30.8                   | 30.8                             |
| 17         | NP          | ndet       | 32.6                   | 16.6                             |
| 18         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 30.5                             |
| 19         | NP          | ndet       | 39.1                   | 25.9                             |
| 20         | NP          | 39.7       | ndet                   | 26.0                             |
| 21         | NP          | ndet       | 35.9                   | 26.6                             |
| 22         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 28.1                             |
| 23         | NP          | ndet       | 30.8                   | 20.2                             |
| 24         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 39.3                             |
| 25         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 29.3                             |
| 26         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | ndet                             |
| 27         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | ndet                             |
| 28         | NP          | ndet       | 34.7                   | 20.8                             |
| 29         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | ndet                             |
| 30         | NP          | ndet       | 27.1                   | 27.1                             |
| 31         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 28.7                             |
| 32         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 34.2                             |
| 33         | NP          | 37.5       | 27.4                   | 14.3                             |
| 34         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 34.5                             |
| 35         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 38.7                             |
| 36         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 32.6                             |
| 37         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 32.9                             |
| 38         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 33.0                             |
| 39         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 36.3                             |
| 40         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | ndet                             |
| 41         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | ndet                             |
| 42         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 27.4                             |
| 43         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 33.2                             |
| 44         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 31.9                             |
| 45         | NP          | ndet       | 38.6                   | 24.4                             |
| 46         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 22.2                             |
| 47         | NP          | ndet       | ndet                   | 36.7                             |

*NP, not present; ndet, not detected; †The control RNA material was run in triplicate at 10 copies/µL and 100 copies/µL each day for 3 days to evaluate precision. Each run included a negative control (0cp/µL); the results of the negative control were not detected.
|   | NP          | 38.8 | ndet | 38.5 | ndet | 28.5 | 31.9 | 15.9 | 16.3 |
|---|-------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 48|   | 38.8 | ndet | 38.5 | ndet | 28.5 | 28.5 | 28.5 | 28.5 |
| 49|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 50|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 51|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 52|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 53|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 54|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 55|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 56|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 57|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 58|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 59|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 60|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 61|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 62|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 63|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 64|   | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 65| Nasal | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 66| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 67| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 68| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 69| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 70| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 71| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 72| Nasal | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 73| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 74| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 75| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 76| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 77| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 78| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 79| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 80| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 81| NP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 82| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 83| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 84| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 85| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 86| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 87| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 88| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 89| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 90| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 91| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 92| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |
| 93| OP | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet | ndet |

*ndet, not detected; NP, nasopharyngeal; OP, oropharyngeal.*
### Appendix Table 4. Full results of the strand-specific real-time reverse transcription PCR assay for prospective clinical samples from patients with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, California, USA, 2020

| Patient ID | Sample type | Background | Minus strand | Plus strand | Cycle threshold by standard PCR or relative light units by transcription-mediated amplification† |
|------------|-------------|------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 94         | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 39.6        | ndet                                                                                   |
| 95         | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 35.9        | 34.2                                                                                 |
| 96         | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.6        | 1.13†                                                                                 |
| 97         | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 40.1                                                                                  |
| 98         | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 584†                                                                                  |
| 99         | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 31.1        | NA                                                                                   |
| 100        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 31.2        | 31.0                                                                                 |
| 101        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | NA                                                                                   |
| 102        | NP          | ndet       | 28.7         | 16.1        | NA                                                                                   |
| 103        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 38.7        | 37.3                                                                                 |
| 104        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | NA                                                                                   |
| 105        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 32.2        | 1.144†                                                                                |
| 106        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 38.9        | 35.2                                                                                 |
| 107        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 35.2        | 1.057†                                                                                |
| 108        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.9        | 21.4                                                                                 |
| 109        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.5        | 34.4                                                                                 |
| 110        | Nasal       | ndet       | ndet         | 36.5        | NA                                                                                   |
| 111        | NP          | ndet       | 27.9         | 13.0        | NA                                                                                   |
| 112        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 37.6        | 36.6                                                                                 |
| 113        | Nasal       | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 38.0                                                                                 |
| 114        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 38.4        | 35.8                                                                                 |
| 115        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 25.9        | 27.2                                                                                 |
| 116        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.8        | 33.6                                                                                 |
| 117        | NP          | ndet       | 39.0         | 23.7        | 18.5                                                                                 |
| 118        | NP          | ndet       | 33.2         | 19.2        | 20.8                                                                                 |
| 119        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 1.140†                                                                                |
| 120        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 26.4                                                                                 |
| 121        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 1.027†                                                                                |
| 122        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.7        | 35.1                                                                                 |
| 123        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 35.3        | 34.7                                                                                 |
| 124        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 38.5        | 783†                                                                                 |
| 125        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.0        | 776†                                                                                 |
| 126        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 30.9        | 33.4                                                                                 |
| 127        | NP          | ndet       | 38.6         | 31.9        | 34.5                                                                                 |
| 128        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 37.3        | NA                                                                                   |
| 129        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.3        | 21.1                                                                                 |
| 130        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.7        | 32.1                                                                                 |
| 131        | Nasal       | ndet       | ndet         | 27.0        | 29.3                                                                                 |
| 132        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 1.282†                                                                                |
| 133        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 37.6                                                                                 |
| 134        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 26.2        | 28                                                                                   |
| 135        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 18.6                                                                                 |
| 136        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 37.5        | 35.8                                                                                 |
| 137        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 32.77       | 33.1                                                                                 |
| 138        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 36.9                                                                                 |
| 139        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 35.48       | 1.084†                                                                                |
| 140        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.94       | 36.8                                                                                 |
| 141        | NP          | ndet       | 27.61        | 16.09       | 18.1                                                                                 |
| 142        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 35.22       | 36.1                                                                                 |
| 143        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 38.4                                                                                 |
| 144        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | ndet        | 957†                                                                                 |
| 145        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 34.04       | 30.04                                                                                 |
| 146        | NP          | ndet       | ndet         | 36.55       | NA                                                                                   |

*NA, not available; ndet, not detected; NP, nasopharyngeal.
†Samples were tested by real-time reverse transcription PCR or by transcription-mediated assay at the Stanford Clinical Virology Laboratory, Stanford, CA, USA. Crosses (†) indicate samples tested on the transcription-mediated assay, for which the results are expressed as relative light units. NA values indicate tests that were performed at external laboratories.
Appendix Figure 1. Linearity of Ct values obtained by strand-specific real-time reverse transcription PCR for the SARS-CoV-2 (A; $y = -3.34x + 34.62; R^2 = 0.99$) minus strand and (B; $y = -3.32x + 34.80; R^2 = 0.99$) plus strand, California, USA, 2020. Ct, cycle threshold; SARS-CoV-2, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2.

Appendix Figure 2. Ratio of minus:plus strand viral load in samples from patients with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 infection, California, USA, 2020. The dataset included 38 samples for which time to symptom onset data were available. Three outliers were excluded from this figure for improved visualization: 1 sample collected $\leq 7$ days after symptom onset ($y = 3.44$), and 2 samples collected 8–14 days after symptoms onset ($y = 1.18$ and $y = 0.21$).