

Occupational Health Service

Supporting Employees with Covid-19

Guide for Recovering Workers

What is 'Post-COVID and 'Long COVID'?

Nice guidelines have divided COVID-19 stages into **Acute COVID-19** (Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 for up to 4 weeks), **ongoing symptomatic COVID-19** (Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 from 4 weeks up to 12 weeks) and **Post-COVID-19 syndrome** (Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 persisting for more than 12 weeks).

The term 'long COVID' is commonly used to describe signs and symptoms that continue or develop after acute COVID-19. It includes both ongoing symptomatic COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 syndrome.

We are still learning about the impact of COVID-19, but we now know that:

- One in five people have symptoms after four weeks, and one in ten has symptoms for 12 weeks or longer.
- There is significant variation in symptoms between individuals and no defined diagnostic pathway for Long COVID
- Long COVID symptoms can be unpredictable and symptoms fluctuate over time
- Common symptoms include: fatigue – tiredness not improved by rest, breathlessness, muscle and joint pain, chest pain, cough and mental health problems including anxiety and Depression
- Other symptoms include headaches, difficulties thinking and finding the right words, heart and blood pressure problems, loss of smell, skin rashes, digestive problems, loss of appetite, sore throat, among others.
- Long COVID can have unusual patterns: relapses, and phases with new, sometimes bizarre, symptoms. An initially mild or even asymptomatic case can be followed later by severe symptoms impacting markedly on day-to-day activities.

A word of reassurance: although recovery from COVID-19 can be slow, many people improve with time, and treatments are expected to improve as more becomes known. Returning to work is part of the recovery, even if it must be flexible or involve reduced hours and pacing over many months.

Workers and employers working together

After the extraordinary stresses – both physical and psychological – of suffering a COVID-19 infection and/or Long COVID, it can be tough to get back to work. You may still be struggling with day-to-day activities but need to work for financial reasons or social reasons to support your mental health. With COVID-19, it is best to stay off work until you are well enough, but with the right support, it

may be possible to return on a phased or partial basis as part of your recovery if you feel fit enough for some duties.

The pandemic has also seen large numbers working remotely or workers being put on furlough. This will have a long-term impact and employers will need to prioritise their core business needs as well as their employees' health and wellbeing.

Employers have had to rapidly change how work is organised to make the environment safe for workers and customers. Your colleagues may be affected.

With all this in mind, it makes sense for workers and employers to work together towards a return to work that is the most productive for all concerned.

During the illness

If you develop symptoms of COVID-19:

- You should have a COVID-19 test. If the test is positive, although there is no longer a legal requirement for people to self-isolate, the advice is to stay at home. You are encouraged to stay at home until 48 hours after your main symptoms have stopped.
- You should contact your manager to let them know you will be absent (or follow Sickness Absence reporting policy) and if required, provide a 'sick note'
- Ensure you rest until you feel well again, as new symptoms can appear many days into the illness.

If you are off work for longer, for example, due to Long COVID, you need to give some information to your manager and discuss:

- How long you have been advised to stay off work, and provide a 'sick note'. As an employee you have a duty to inform your manager as soon as possible if you are off sick, to provide a 'sick note' and to give some idea of how long you will be off sick. An NHS 111 email may be sufficient.
- You are not required to give your manager medical details. You can say as much or as little as you want
- If you intend to return to work, you should arrange a meeting with your manager beforehand. If you are still too unwell to work, you are required to produce another 'sick note'. You can make contact via telephone, email, virtual (Teams or Zoom) or in person. You can agree with your manager which method suits you both.
- You may feel anxious or low in mood. If you are worried about any new symptoms you should contact your GP
- Long COVID can last for many months and you may need help with accessing healthcare tests and scans that would speed a return to work.

The manager's role

<https://hr.gov.im/sickness-and-absence/supporting-staff-off-sick/>

- It is good practice for your manager to keep in contact when you are off sick, even if this is just a telephone call agreed between worker and manager, to ask how you are and if there is anything they can do to help. This helps keep you connected to your workplace. People who are off work for a long time often say they miss the daily routine of work and miss the contact with other people. Some workplaces will encourage team members to keep in touch with absent workers and again your preferences for contact with wider colleagues can be discussed with the manager.
- The manager can offer support not only by asking how you are now, but also by checking that you have the medical help you need and acknowledging that you have been having a difficult time.

Returning to work

If you are starting a new job, you may be asked if you have any health problems for which you need support to do your job. You don't have to tell anyone this but if you would like support, for instance, because you have problems following COVID-19, you can ask to be referred to occupational health.

Some jobs have special health and safety standards and for these you may need to have a health assessment. In those situations, you are legally advised to tell the occupational health department of your health conditions.

Return to work meeting (sometimes called return to work 'interview')

A manager should:

- Hold a meeting with you before returning to work to talk about the return to work process and ask how they can support you (by telephone or virtual is appropriate during the pandemic)
- Once back at work, as soon as possible arrange a review (may be by tele- or virtual)
- Review workloads and ensure you will not be under excessive pressure

It can be helpful to involve Human Resources partners or union representatives.

<https://hr.gov.im/sickness-and-absence/return-to-work/>

Medical clearance before returning to work

This will depend on your job role.

- If your work is physically demanding, then you must have medical checks on your heart and lungs before returning to this.
- There may be other health checks that are required if you are in a safety-critical role.

- If you have any pre-existing health conditions that have been aggravated by COVID-19, any previous work restrictions must be reviewed.

Adjustments to work duties can help enormously and there are many options.

These should be discussed between you and your managers.

- Do make suggestions, based on your experience and knowledge of your job and your health condition.
- Take advice from your doctors on anything you should and should not do, and if uncertain, ask for an Occupational Health Referral.
- Discuss with your manager the reasonable adjustments that can be made to your duties (if it turns out that you may need long term changes to your work, that is for later).

Adjustments to work duties

Types of adjustments are best worked out and discussed between you and your manager. Occupational Health has seen the best results when the manager and employee work this out together and can be flexible. Do not be afraid to make suggestions.

However, your manager may not be able to accommodate everything you request, and this will depend on the job.

Phased return

Because of the duration and impact of your symptoms, you may need a gradual return to work, also known as 'phased return'. Phased returns can be adapted as you go along.

<https://hr.gov.im/sickness-and-absence/phased-return>

Long COVID tends to relapse if people overdo exertion, often not manifesting itself until days later, and you should be guided by your symptoms.

Other examples of adjustments

Adjustments should be tailored to you as an individual, and depend on what your health problems are, how they affect your ability to do things and your job role. Some of the following may seem obvious but it is useful to formalise these to ensure that they happen.

- Alteration to timings (starts, finishes, and breaks)
- Altered hours e.g. shorter days, days off between workdays
- Alteration to workload e.g. fewer tasks than normal within a time. More time to complete usual tasks
- Patterns of working e.g. need for regular breaks
- Temporary changes to duties or tasks ('altered tasks')
- Clear objectives and review mechanisms
- Working from home part of the time
- Equipment adjustments e.g. blue light screen filters, voice activated software, ergonomic office chairs, enhanced moving/handling equipment

- Other support include - Clear line of supervision - someone to ask or check with, working with a 'buddy', time off for healthcare appointments and not working in isolation

If your health condition is fluctuating, it is useful to tell your manager this.

How can occupational health services help you?

Occupational Health Professionals recognise that when duration of illness is long, returning to work too soon or to a full workload can cause relapse. They can help in the following ways:

- carry out an individualised assessment, generating an individualised recovery and rehabilitation plan and ensuring relevant medical investigations have been performed
- They are experienced in assessing employees with new health conditions, poorly understood conditions, and at evaluating the impact of symptoms on functioning
- Contribute to an individualised workplace/task risk assessment with you and your colleague
- Consider safety of the individual worker and their co-workers
- Put in place health surveillance if adjustment to standard health assessment is required for some other risk.

References

<https://www.som.org.uk/covid-19-return-work-guide-recovering-workers>

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng188/resources/covid19-rapid-guideline-managing-the-longterm-effects-of-covid19-pdf-51035515742>

<https://hr.gov.im/sickness-and-absence/sickness-absence-procedure/>

Managing Covid related symptoms during sickness absence:

<https://youtu.be/3fHeLbDo40U>

Return to work rehabilitation:

<https://youtu.be/29KcxHJb4qU>

Managing ongoing covid related symptoms in the workplace:

<https://youtu.be/JNUBmWJgFms>

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