

COVID-19 INFECTION AND LONG COVID – GUIDE FOR WORKERS

Guide for recovering workers



Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| Workers and employers working together | 2 |
| During your illness | 2 |
| What to do if you develop symptoms of COVID-19..... | 2 |
| Things to discuss with your manager if you are off work for longer, for example because of long COVID | 2 |
| Your manager's role..... | 3 |
| Returning to work | 3 |
| Return-to-work meeting (or return-to-work 'interview') | 4 |
| Medical clearance before returning to work..... | 4 |
| Adjustments to work duties | 4 |
| Examples of adjustments to workduties | 5 |
| Phased return | 5 |
| Other examples..... | 5 |
| How can occupational health services help you? | 5 |
| Your employer's overall responsibilities | 6 |

Workers and employers working together

After the extraordinary stresses — both physical and psychological — of suffering from 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 to return, but, with the right support, it may be possible to return on a phased or partial basis once you are not infectious to others as part of your recovery, if you feel fit enough for some duties. For many people, the infection lasts a couple of days, though it is common to last two–four weeks. This is called ‘acute COVID’.

‘Long COVID’ is a term that is used if after four weeks your symptoms continue and prevent you from doing normal activities. Research studies estimate that one in five people has symptoms after five weeks, and 1 in 10 has symptoms for 12 weeks or longer after acute COVID-19. A [policy brief](#) on long COVID was published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in February 2021 and further sets out the symptoms, prevalence and management of the condition.

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 process, even if it must be flexible or phased at first.

The pandemic has been a hard time for employers, too. They have had to rapidly change how work is organised to make the environment safe for workers and customers. They have been struggling with the number of people off sick. Many people may be affected in a single organisation.

The pandemic has also seen large numbers of people working remotely and a number of businesses/industries (e.g. hospitality) close, which has meant that many workers have been 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 well-being.

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

During your illness

What to do if you develop symptoms of COVID-19

- You should have a COVID-19 test and stay off work. If the test is positive, or your doctor thinks your symptoms are due to COVID-19, you should stay off work and self-isolate from when you tested positive or your symptoms first started. Check your national rules and employer requirements on this.
- You should contact your manager to let them know you will be absent and, if required by national rules, provide a notification, for example a ‘sick note’.
- You should ensure you rest until you feel well again, as new symptoms can appear many days into the illness.
- You should ensure you comply with any testing requirements before returning to work. If in doubt, check with your occupational health service or your employer.

Things to discuss with your manager if you are off work for longer, for example because of long COVID

- How long you have been advised to stay off work: as an employee you have a duty to inform your manager as soon as possible if you are off sick, provide a ‘sick note’ and give some idea of how long you will be absent. If this is not possible because of restrictions on face-to-face appointments, consult a physician.

Note: the information in your 'sick note' should be an agreement between you and the physician who writes it. Your health information is confidential to you, but it does help to give your employer a simple explanation.

- The reason for being off work: something simple and general is enough, such as 'I have suspected COVID-19' or a 'viral illness'. You are not required to give your manager any medical details. You can say as much or as little as you want.
- When you should contact your manager to provide an update: 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 must produce another 'sick note'. You can make contact via telephone, email or video link, or meet face to face. You can agree on the method with your manager.
- Some people will have continuing symptoms such as fatigue for a few weeks, and others may have effects of the infection that take longer to recover from. Other common symptoms are a fast heart rate, breathlessness and pain. You may feel anxious or low in mood. If you are worried about any new symptoms you should contact a physician.
- Long COVID can have unusual patterns: relapses and phases with new, sometimes bizarre, symptoms.
- An initially mild case can be followed by later severe problems that can impact markedly on day-to-day activities.
- Long COVID can last for many months.
- You may need help with accessing healthcare tests and scans that would speed up a return to work. **Do not hold back from asking for this.**

Your manager's role

- 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 on between you and your 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 the contact with other people. Some workplaces will encourage team members to keep in touch with absent workers; again, your preferences for contact with colleagues can be discussed with your manager.
- It is helpful to agree on what information can be shared with colleagues and clients, while respecting confidentiality and what you do not wish to share.
- 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.
- Some businesses can facilitate your return to work by agreeing to pay for healthcare tests, scans or medical appointments that you would otherwise be unable to access.
- Your manager needs to understand that you do not need a positive test for the diagnosis of COVID-19. It can be diagnosed by symptoms.

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 do not have to tell anyone this, but if you would like support, for instance because you have problems as a result of COVID-19, you can ask to be referred to the occupational health service or physician.

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

Return-to-work meeting (or return-to-work ‘interview’)

▪ Your manager should:

- hold a meeting with you before you return to work to talk about the process and ask how they can support you (by telephone or videoconference is appropriate during the pandemic);
- arrange a review as soon as possible once you are back at work (this may also need to be by tele- or videoconference);
- review workloads and ensure you will not be under excessive pressure;
- consider involving the occupational health service or physician, the human resources department, your supervisor or worker representatives.

The line manager and employee could list work demands under the following categories and give an estimated percentage of each day taken up with such demands (prior to sickness absence), and establish if the employee perceives the demands will be an issue on return to work:

- cognitive — processing complex data, data entry requiring intense concentration, rapid switching of tasks, using multiple systems, complex decision-making, rapid and high-risk decision-making, managing multiple stakeholders or reports;
- physical — repetitive movement, static postures, occasional moving of awkward or heavy items;
- emotional — dealing with vulnerable people/children, distressed clients/customers, potential for aggression or violence, the need to be emotionally flexible and resilient.

This could help to identify specific and useful adjustments.

Medical clearance before returning to work

▪ This will depend on your job role.

- If your work involves heavy lifting or other exertion, then you must have medical checks on your heart and lungs before returning to these activities.
- Other health checks, such as an eyesight test or cognitive assessment, may be 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

▪ Adjustments can help enormously, and there are many options. These should be discussed between you and your manager.

- Make suggestions to your manager, based on your experience and knowledge of your job and your health condition.
- Take advice from your doctor on anything you should and should not do, and ask to see the occupational physician or health service. You may feel guilty about being off work, but it is important that you do not return to work too early and do not overwork when you return.
- Discuss with your manager the reasonable adjustments that can be made to your duties. (If it turns out that you may need permanent changes to your work that can be addressed later.)
- Ask for information on your employer’s rehabilitation policy. You may also seek support from any well-being, counselling and psychological support services provided by your employer or trade union.
- It is best to agree with your manager on a return-to-work plan that you are both comfortable with. It needs to be feasible and should set out who needs to do what and when. It also needs to be flexible because, until you try, you will not know what works for you both.
- Independently of these adaptations, your employer must continue to implement and maintain effective workplace infection control measures.
- As part of the return-to-work review, agree on a workload that leaves you with some energy for family, socialising and leisure.

Examples of adjustments to work duties

Phased return

Because of the duration and impact of your symptoms, you may need a gradual return to work, also known as a 'phased return'. Phased returns can be adapted as you go along. After COVID-19, people often need a much longer phased return than the average four weeks.

People with long COVID often tend to relapse if they overexert themselves. Often, it does not manifest itself until days later; you should be guided by your symptoms.

There are no limits to the types of adjustment; these are best worked out and discussed between you and your manager, while both of you should be flexible. Do not be afraid to make suggestions; however, your manager may not be able to accommodate everything you request — this will depend on the job.

Other examples

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.

- alterations to timings (starts, finishes and breaks);
- alterations to hours, e.g. shorter days, days off between workdays;
- alterations to workload, e.g.:
 - ✚ set fewer tasks than normal within a time
 - ✚ allow more time to complete usual tasks;
- alterations to work patterns, e.g. need for regular breaks;
- temporary changes to duties or tasks ('altered tasks');
- support, e.g.:
 - ✚ clear line of supervision — someone to ask or check with
 - ✚ a 'buddy' system, in which two individuals, operate together so that they are able to monitor and help each other.
 - ✚ time off for healthcare appointments
 - ✚ not working in isolation;
- 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.

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

If you have a medical condition that is likely to be considered a disability, the employer may have extra legal requirements to make reasonable adjustments.

How can occupational health services help you?

Occupational health services and occupational physicians recognise that duration of illness can be long, and that early return can cause relapse. They can help in the following ways:

- By carrying out an individualised health risk assessment;
- By assessing employees with new conditions and poorly understood conditions, and evaluating the impact of symptoms on functioning;
- By carrying out an individualised workplace/task risk assessment with you and your line manager;
- By considering your safety and that of your co-workers;
- By putting in place health surveillance and rehabilitation programmes if some adjustment to standard health surveillance is required for some other risk.

If you work for a large organisation, ask if they provide:

- a counselling helpline;
- rehabilitation, e.g. physiotherapy and occupational therapy;
- practical support on issues such as childcare and long-term health conditions, to help people to get and keep jobs.

Your employer's overall responsibilities

Here are some points to look out for in your employer's attitudes to its work force, mental health and procedures:

- general policies to ensure 'good work' for all;
- a sickness absence policy;
- flexible working policies;
- safety and health at work obligations;
- disability and other equality policies.

This leaflet offers guidance for workers on how to manage getting back to work after COVID-19 infection or long COVID.

COVID-19 is a new illness; therefore, this is an interim document that will be updated as new information becomes available.

EU-OSHA has also developed a COVID-19 return-to-work guide for recovering workers — see <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/covid-19-resources-workplace>

EU-OSHA has produced a number of guidance documents and tools for enterprises to address the impact of COVID-19 on workplaces. They can be consulted by visiting the dedicated web section [Healthy Workplaces Stop the Pandemic](#). Additional material can be found by visiting EU-OSHA's web section [Rehabilitation and return to work](#).

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