



*People
& Safety*



Long Covid-19 Return to Work Guide

This guide provides information from our HR, Health & Safety and Wellbeing specialists on how organisations and managers can support staff coming back to work with ongoing symptoms following COVID-19 infection such as Long COVID

1. What is Long COVID?

Most infections with COVID resolve within the first four weeks. “Long COVID” is an informal term commonly used to describe signs and symptoms continuing or developing after the infection. Where the symptoms continue for more than four weeks, they can be referred to as ongoing symptomatic COVID. If the symptoms continue for more than 12 weeks and cannot be explained by any other condition, they will then be referred to as Long COVID or Post-COVID Syndrome.

Medical professionals are still learning about the impact of COVID-19 but know

- one in five people have symptoms after four weeks
- between one in ten and one in seven experience symptoms for longer than 12 weeks
- Long COVID symptoms can vary and fluctuate over time

Common symptoms include:

- fatigue – tiredness not improved by rest
- breathlessness
- muscle and joint pain
- chest pain
- cough
- fever
- headaches
- ‘brain fog’
- dizziness
- digestive problems
- mental health problems including anxiety and depression

COVID is a relatively new virus and as such, there is no established diagnostic pathway for Long COVID. Depending on the symptoms, medical professionals look for appropriate treatment. The recovery time is different for everyone and the length of the recovery is not necessarily related to the severity of the initial illness. Even asymptomatic cases can be followed by Long COVID symptoms impacting on day-to-day activities.

Returning to work, even if it requires decreased hours, more flexibility and pacing over several months, is an important element of the recovery process.

2. The Organisations' Role in Supporting Staff Return to Work

The lack of clinical knowledge around the lasting effects of Long COVID as well as any sickness absence potentially linked to this condition must be handled with empathy. As Long COVID has an adverse impact on day to day activities, if it lasts 12 months or more or is likely to last 12 months or more, it may well be considered as a disability under the Equality Act 2010.

Staff might feel they are being treated less fairly than those around them because of their condition which could result in a disability discrimination claim.

Similarly, organisations must be careful to avoid other types of discrimination when managing Long COVID sickness absence, as this condition has been found to most severely affect older people, ethnic minorities, women and staff with pre-existing health conditions. Organisations must therefore avoid unlawfully discriminating against any staff member diagnosed with Long COVID by reason of age, race, sex or any of the other nine protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

Any sickness absence relating to COVID and/or Long COVID or attendance issues should not be considered towards any triggers contained in any absence management policies. Staff should not be subject to any disciplinary action or otherwise due to high sickness absence or attendance issues relating to COVID or Long COVID

3. Supporting Staff with Long COVID Return to Work

Different staff will require different levels of support depending on their role, long-term symptoms, work environment and personal circumstances. It is vital to listen to their requirements and concerns, actively involve them in decision making which allow for managing and supporting their physical and mental health at work. These steps can help plan what can be done and enable those in line management positions to support returning staff the best chance of getting back to work safely and staying at work.

Step 1: Communicate with Staff Absent from Work

- Maintain contact – Help make sure staff know they are being thought of. Agree how you will stay in touch (frequency; via phone or email).
- If they are off work for more than seven calendar days, they are required to provide a Fit Note from their GP. If they do not supply this timeously, ask for it.
- Agree what to tell others. It's helpful to agree what information should be shared with team members and service users whilst respecting confidentiality.
- As the organisation accesses GCVS services, Integral Occupational Health and Healing for the Heart can be used to assess fitness to return to active duty and provide mental health support may be of benefit, these services can be accessed by staff directly. Make sure staff have contact information on how to access them.
- Ensure staff know they can and should rest and recuperate. Many people feel guilty about being off work and this can hinder recovery – let them know help and support is available, rather than asking them when they will be returning.

Step 2: Prepare for the Return to Work

- Staff may require medical assessment before returning to active duty such as when their role involves high levels of exertion or stress, safety-critical roles or if they have pre-existing health conditions which may have deteriorated due to COVID-19.
- An occupational health assessment may be beneficial for the organisation to identify what support may be of benefit such as a phased return and/or reasonable adjustments.
- Consider how the person might be feeling, what they might be concerned about and what their priorities might be.
- Arrange a return to work conversation to agree a Return Plan. Some staff may well experience changing symptoms and may take time to be able to work at the same level as before. Be prepared to be flexible and for changes over time and the plan will likely need to adapt as time passes.
- Access to Work, a government organisation which finances and supports workplace adjustments to keep staff in work. The returning person must contact them and a meeting will be organised to identify the support they need.

Step 3: Hold a Return to Work Meeting

- Every absence, no matter how long or short, requires a return to work meeting before staff return to active duty.
- Before having the meeting, the manager should consider what reasonable adjustments are required to the job, ask the member of staff to do the same.
- Make sure they come to the meeting prepared to explain how their condition might impact their work, what tasks they feel able to do now and the reasonable adjustments which will help them do their job or most of the job as their condition allows.
- During the conversation, take time to set them at ease, ask how they are, ask if there is anything they are concerned about and explore solutions.
- Discuss possible reasonable adjustments such as reviewing work priorities, work schedule for the first weeks of their return – ask for their ideas. Explain this will be monitored and reviewed regularly.
- Agree what the first day and week of work might involve. Agree on a Return to Work Plan both parties are comfortable with. The return to work plan does need to be achievable and flexible, ensure it sets out who needs to do what and by when.
- Remember, reasonable adjustments will be different for everyone depending on their Long COVID symptoms.

Step 4: Providing Support During the Early Days of the Return to Work

- Whenever possible, ensure the person who undertook the return to work meeting is available to welcome them back on the first day.
- Remind them to take things slowly to start with as this will prevent them feeling overwhelmed and reduce the risk of further absence.
- Have a note of the work priorities, schedule and agreed reasonable adjustments are in place.
- Ensure they are updated on any changes which have been made to the way work is done, introduced to new colleagues etc.
- Arrange regular check-ins to talk through how they are managing their health and work.

Step 5: Provide Ongoing Support and Review Regularly

- As the symptoms of COVID and Long COVID can change over time, it is important reasonable adjustments are regularly reviewed. This allows for anticipation of potential concerns and ensures staff have the best possible chance of managing any ongoing symptoms and staying in work.
- Communicate often and openly – arrange check-ins to see what is working and what needs to be reviewed.
- Review workloads and agree to gradually increase the duties over time – sometimes this will mean over months rather than weeks. A successful return to full active duty may be more likely if it is at a slow pace. It is also likely to prevent relapse and further absence
- Seek advice from HR and/or Occupational Health, where appropriate. Policies on COVID may be required, particularly about sickness absence and the need to support rather than penalise those who need an extended period of absence or modified duties

4. Reasonable Adjustments

Organisations should consider what reasonable adjustments can be made to support the return to work, and prevent a risk of relapse. It is the organisation who decides what is and is not a reasonable adjustment. The member of staff, medical professional or otherwise can suggest reasonable adjustments but it is the organisation who decides whether or not it is reasonable to implement.

Reasonable adjustments may result in financial savings associated with sick pay and temporary cover, provided these adjustments are effective in minimising the impact of the symptoms of Long COVID and supporting the staff in their role. It's therefore important, any adjustments made are appropriate to the specific range of symptoms experienced by the staff.

Phased Return and Working Hours

Due to the length and impact of post-COVID symptoms, some staff may need a gradual return to work, also known as a 'phased return'.

For staff experiencing fatigue, remote working and 'pacing' (working with regular rest breaks) will be important. Some staff may be able to continue on their normal hours, for others a planned reduction of working hours could be more effective.

Those with Long COVID may relapse if they over exert themselves, this may not however be immediately apparent.

Reasonable adjustments should be tailored to the individual and will depend on what their specific symptoms and limitations are, how they affect their ability to do things and the job role. Individualised recovery and rehabilitation plans may also be necessary.

Examples of Reasonable Adjustments:

- Alterations to the timing of work (starts, finishes, and breaks).
- Alterations of hours worked (shorter days, days off between workdays).
- Alterations to shift work (short term suspension of late or early shifts and/or night duty).
- Alterations to the patterns of working (pacing, regular and/or additional breaks).
- Alterations to workload (reduced tasks with time to complete them).

- Temporary changes to duties or tasks ('altered tasks').
- Support:
 - clear line of help – someone to ask or check with
 - a 'buddy' system
 - time off for healthcare appointments
 - Not working in isolation.
- Clear objectives and review mechanisms.
- Working from home part or all of the time where possible.
- Regular checks on whether the symptoms are changing.

5. Useful Resources

- *Occupational Health Advice and Referrals:* GCVS have partnered with [Integral Occupational Health](#) to help provide access to Occupational Health Services. For more information, please email peopleservices@gcvs.org.uk or Integral Health directly at ohdirect@integraloh.com quoting GCVS.
- *Counselling:* GCVS have partnered with [Healing for the Heart](#) to help provide access to Counselling Services. For more information, please email peopleservices@gcvs.org.uk or Healing for the Heart directly at info@healingfortheheart.co.uk quoting GCVS.
- NHS website on Long Covid with information for family, friends and employers as well as an online recovery programme to support individuals after COVID - <https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/>
- The Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Association has published a leaflet about [post-Covid fatigue](#). You can also call them on 0344 576 5326 for further support
- Further information on Long Covid from the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health - [Long Covid \(iosh.com\)](#)
- NHS resource on [long-term effects of coronavirus \(Long COVID\) - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)
- NICE guidance on managing the long-term effects of COVID - [Overview | COVID-19 rapid guideline: managing the long-term effects of COVID-19 | Guidance | NICE](#)
- If you are worried about staff's mental health, consider recommending speaking to a national helpline such as the Mental Health Hub (available 24/7 through NHS24, dial 111) or Breathing Space (open 6pm-2am Mon-Thurs and Fri 6pm –Sun 6am, dial 0800 83 85 87)
- *Glasgow Only:* Occupational Health Long Covid Service - The Occupational Health Long Covid Service provides support, advice and rehabilitation for NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde employees who continue to be affected by ongoing symptoms related to Covid-19 infection that have lasted more than 12 weeks and impacts on their performance or attendance at work. Access to the service is currently through management referral.

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