

COVID-19 INFECTION AND LONG COVID – GUIDE FOR MANAGERS

Supporting returning workers: Key points



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▪ **What is the post-COVID experience?**

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

- One in five people has symptoms after four weeks, and 1 in 10 has symptoms for 12 weeks or longer. For some, symptoms may last many months.
- Symptoms can be unpredictable and fluctuate over time.
- Common symptoms include extreme fatigue, breathlessness, muscle and joint pain, chest pain and mental health problems.
- Most workers with ongoing symptoms will need accommodations to be made in the workplace, but some may not.
- The unpredictable and fluctuating nature of long COVID means that some workers may need to return to work gradually, over a long period of time — building up their work capacity.

▪ **Why are managers important in supporting return to work?**

As a manager you are often the first point of contact. Evidence shows that line managers have a significant impact on successful return to work; what you do and how you behave can affect whether the returning worker is able to return to and stay in work. You do not need to be an expert in long COVID or have all the answers, but it is important that you are there to support the returning worker, listen to their concerns and act where you can.

▪ **The importance of working together to find a solution**

Everyone is different. Each person will require different levels of support depending on their role, long-term symptoms, work environment and personal situation. It is important to listen to the returning worker's needs and concerns, allow them to be proactive in making changes that allow them to manage their health and work, and work together to find solutions that work for them and your team.

▪ **Key steps to follow when supporting your returning worker**

Following these steps will give your returning worker the best chance of getting back to work safely and staying at work. More information on each step is provided in this guide.

- ✚ *Step 1:* stay in touch while the worker is absent from work.
- ✚ *Step 2:* prepare for the worker's return.
- ✚ *Step 3:* have a return-to-work conversation.
- ✚ *Step 4:* provide support during the early days after return to work.
- ✚ *Step 5:* provide ongoing support and review regularly.

▪ **Using this guide**

You will find information in this guide to help you support workers returning to work following a COVID-19 infection or long COVID. This information can be used alongside your organisation's existing absence management practices.

Remember, if you are not sure of what to do, reach out to your human resources contact — you do not need to do this on your own.

This leaflet offers guidance on how managers can support workers with ongoing symptoms to get back to work following COVID-19 infection or long COVID.

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>

What are ‘post covid’ and ‘long covid’?

For many people, COVID-19 symptoms last a couple of days, though symptoms can commonly last two to four weeks. This is called ‘acute COVID’. ‘Long COVID’ is a term often used if after four weeks symptoms are still stopping a person from doing normal activities. Other terms used to describe the same condition include ‘ongoing symptomatic COVID-19’ (symptoms lasting 4-12 weeks) and ‘post-COVID-19 syndrome’ (12 weeks or more).

- There is still much to learn about the impact of COVID-19, but research studies reveal that:
- One in five people has symptoms after four weeks, and 1 in 10 has symptoms for 12 weeks or longer. For some, symptoms may last many months.
- There is significant variation in symptoms between individuals and no defined diagnostic pathway for long COVID.
- Long COVID symptoms can be unpredictable and fluctuate over time; for some people, symptoms are ongoing, for others they come and go.
- Common symptoms include:
 - ✚ fatigue — tiredness not improved by rest
 - ✚ breathlessness
 - ✚ muscle and joint pain
 - ✚ chest pain
 - ✚ a cough
 - ✚ mental health concerns including anxiety and depression.
- other symptoms include headaches, difficulties thinking and finding the right words, heart and blood pressure problems, loss of sense of smell, skin rashes, digestive problems, loss of appetite and a sore throat.
- Long COVID can have unusual patterns: relapses and phases with new, sometimes unusual, symptoms. An initially mild or even asymptomatic case can be followed by severe symptoms markedly affecting 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 process, even if it must be flexible or involve reduced hours and ‘pacing’ over many months.

Why are managers important in supporting return to work?

The experience of being unwell, especially with long COVID, with its fluctuating and unusual symptoms, can be concerning for both the worker and the manager but it does not need to be — the advice in this leaflet will help managers support workers back into work.

Everyone’s experience after COVID-19 is different; it is challenging for some, yet for many people getting back to work in some capacity (not necessarily full time or to the same duties) is important for financial reasons, improving mental health and social reasons, and to give them the best chance of staying in work — it may even help them recover.

- As a manager you play a vital role in supporting your worker back to work. As a manager you are:
- often the first point of contact for the worker;
- best placed to help the worker feel valued and help them retain a sense of identity when they are not at their best;
- able to put in place job modifications or work adjustments to enable them to cope with both their job and their health on their return.

Human resources could also play a significant role, supporting managers while conducting a number of tasks mentioned in this guide.

What should managers do to help someone with long covid return to work?

- **Everyone is different.**

Each person will require different levels of support depending on their role, long-term symptoms, work environment and personal situation. It is important to listen to their needs and concerns, allow them to be proactive in making changes that allow them to manage their health and work, and work together to find solutions. Following these steps will help plan what can be done and enable you to give your returning worker the best chance of getting back to work safely and staying at work.

Step 1: stay in touch while the worker is absent from work

- **Maintain contact.** Let them know you are thinking of them. Agree how you will stay in touch (frequency; via phone or email).
- **Discuss the legal rights and duties** of both the employer and worker regarding sick leave. If the worker is off work for a number of days, a formal notification may have to be provided according to the requirements in your national legislation.
- **Agree what to tell others.** It is helpful to agree what information should be shared with colleagues and clients, but respect confidentiality.
- If you have **access to occupational health and/or psychological/well-being support services**, inform workers of the support available and how to access it. Occupational health services and physicians are experienced in advising on adjustments and support, communicating advice to relevant managers after obtaining worker consent.
- Discuss with the worker their wishes regarding interventions, rehabilitation programmes, job coaching and external return-to-work agencies.
- **Give the worker permission to rest and recuperate.** Many people feel guilty about being off work and this can hinder their recovery — let them know you are there to help and support, rather than asking them when they think they will be returning.
- **Provide information to workers on any rehabilitation policies** established in your company, whether specific to COVID-19 or not.

Step 2: prepare for the worker's return

- **Some people may require medical clearance before returning to work** — for example where work involves high exertion or stress, or safety-critical roles, or when workers have pre-existing health conditions that have deteriorated due to COVID-19.
- **Put yourself in their shoes:** how would you feel if you had been seriously ill and unsure about whether you would fully recover? Try to think about 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 workers may experience fluctuating symptoms and may take time to be able to work at the same level as before. Be prepared to be flexible and for things to change over time — you may need to change the plan. Occupational health services, supervisors and worker representatives could support such arrangements.
- **Consult with your occupational health service or occupational physician on how to adapt the workplace.** They may also be able to consult with the physicians treating your employee.
- Provide information on long COVID and on work and return-to-work issues to the worker's colleagues and supervisors.
- Consider **seeking advice** and using any **support schemes**, or taking advantage of any **governmental provisions — generic or COVID-19 specific** — that provide support for workplace adjustments to keep employees in work.

Step 3: have a return-to-work conversation

- **Before the conversation** think about what modifications to the job and duties may be workable options and ask the worker to do the same. Make sure they come to the meeting prepared to discuss how their condition might impact on their work, what tasks they feel able to do now and, importantly, what modifications will help them do (part of) their job. Remind them to take advice from their doctors on anything they should and should not do and involve occupational health services or physicians. It can be helpful to involve human resources, partners, the worker's 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 that 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, or 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.
- **During the conversation** take time to check in and set them at ease; ask how they are and if there is anything they are worried about, and explore solutions. Talk about possible job modifications, work priorities and the work schedule for the first weeks of their return — ask for their ideas. Explain that you will monitor and review how things are progressing. Discuss what the first day and week of work might involve. Agree on a return-to-work plan that you are both comfortable with. It needs to be doable, so make sure it sets 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. Share the plan with occupational health services or occupational physicians, and also consider sharing it with human resources, or the worker's colleagues.
- **Avoid any unsolicited adjustments.**

Step 4: provide support during the early days of the return to work

- Make sure you are available to welcome them back on the first day.
- Give them permission to take things slowly to start with, as this will prevent them from feeling overwhelmed and reduce the risk of further absence.
- Remind them of the work priorities, schedule and modifications you have agreed on and check these are in place and working well.
- Ensure that the returned worker is updated on any changes that have been made to the way work is done, introduce them to new colleagues, tell them any recent news, etc.
- Arrange regular check-ins to talk through how they are managing their health and work.

Step 5: provide ongoing support and review regularly

This is where things are a bit different from the usual return-to-work procedure. Because the symptoms after COVID-19 fluctuate and change over time, it is even more important that workloads/job modifications are regularly reviewed. If available, a regular review of progress following return to work with an occupational health professional is recommended. This way you can anticipate problems and ensure that your employee has the best possible chance of managing any ongoing symptoms and staying in work.

- **Communicate regularly 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 as time goes on — sometimes this will be over months rather than weeks. For some people, a successful return will be more likely if this is at a slow pace. This is likely to prevent relapse and further absence. For a few people,

ongoing symptoms may mean that they are unable to meet the requirements of the job — if so, it could be time to talk about a change of duties or redeployment.

- **Seek advice from human resources where appropriate.** Interim policies on COVID-19 may need to be implemented, particularly regarding sickness absence and the need to support rather than penalise those who need an extended period of absence or modified duties.
- Extended absence or modified work may have implications for staff training; consider how this could affect training requirements, particularly in regulated professions.
- **Keep an eye on the workload of other workers.** Depending on the infection rates in your local area and the protocols in effect, many of your workers may be absent because of COVID-19 or the long-term effects in the case of serious disease. The absence or reduced work ability of a substantial number of workers may cause a strain on continuing activities and remaining workers. Keep any additional workload as low as possible and ensure that it does not last too long. Line managers have an important role in monitoring the situation and ensuring that individual workers are not overburdened. Respect the rules and agreements on working hours and rest periods and allow workers the right to disconnect when off work.
- Irrespective of vaccination roll-out, or return to work for those recovered, maintain the recommended infection control measures (including social distancing, regular handwashing/hygiene and face covering use) to prevent the spread of the virus. These steps remain important, even as vaccination is rolled out.
- As part of the return-to-work review, make sure that the employee is not using up all their energy on work, with nothing left for family, socialising and leisure.

Examples of job modifications

There are lots of possible modifications or small changes that can make it easier for returning workers to manage their health and their work. Occupational health professionals see the best results when manager and worker figure this out together. Be flexible. Do not be afraid to make suggestions and encourage ideas from your worker, but avoid imposing adjustments. Obviously, you may not be able to accommodate every suggestion, but usually it is possible to find workable modifications to suit the job. The key thing is to have a plan you both agree on.

Phased return and working hours

Because of the duration and impact of post-COVID symptoms, people may need a gradual return to work, also known as a 'phased return'. A standard, short, phased return is unlikely to be adequate for long COVID. Phased returns can be adapted as time goes on, which may be many weeks or months.

For those workers with fatigue symptoms, remote working and 'pacing' (i.e. working with rest breaks as determined by symptoms) are important. Some workers may be able to continue their full hours; for others a planned reduction of working hours could be more effective.

Sometimes workers with long COVID can relapse if they overdo it, perhaps not until days later. You will need to be guided by the worker (and be aware that they too are still learning how to live with and manage their symptoms).

Other examples

Modifications should be tailored to the individual and will depend on what their specific symptoms and limitations are, how these affect their ability to do things and the job role. Individualised recovery and rehabilitation plans are necessary. Some of the following may seem obvious, but it is useful to formalise these to ensure that they happen:

- alterations to the timing of work (starts, finishes and breaks);
- alterations to hours worked, e.g. shorter days, days off between workdays;
- alterations to shift work, e.g. consider suspending late or early shifts and/or night duty, so the individual works when at their best;
- alterations to work patterns, e.g. pacing, regular and/or additional breaks;

- alterations to workload, e.g.:
 - ✚ set fewer tasks than normal within a given time
 - ✚ allow more time to complete usual tasks and avoid working to tight deadlines;
- temporary changes to duties or tasks ('altered tasks');
- support, e.g.:
 - ✚ 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 of the time, where possible;
- regular checks on whether symptoms are fluctuating;

If you think the medical condition is likely to be considered a disability, the employer may have extra legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments. Seek advice from the occupational health service and human resources.

How can occupational health services help managers and returning workers?

When duration of illness is long, returning to work too soon or to a full workload can cause relapse. Occupational health professionals can help in several ways:

- by providing support in effectively revising the workplace risk assessment to address long COVID and return to work, as well as in terms of control measures in the workplace;
- by carrying out individualised assessments, 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 and poorly understood conditions, and in evaluating the impact of symptoms on functioning;
- by contributing to an individualised workplace/task risk assessment with you and your colleague;
- by considering the safety of the individual worker and their co-workers;
- by putting in place health surveillance if adjustment to standard health assessment is required for some other risk.

For more information, consult an occupational health professional, the occupational health service or an occupational physician.

A manager's overall responsibilities

Your role is to support the returning worker by maintaining open communication and supporting work modifications where possible. You do not need to have all the answers.

If you are not sure what to do or need help and advice, ask for help from other managers, your human resources professional or an occupational health professional.

If you work for a large organisation, make sure you know where to find information about the following:

- return-to-work policies established by your organisation;
- well-being and psychological support pathways (e.g. counselling, staff networks);
- rehabilitation support (e.g. physiotherapy);
- practical support on issues such as childcare and long-term health conditions.

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

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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