

Guidance for managers and employers on facilitating return to work of employees with long-COVID

General OH principles

- Work is generally good for health
- Work provides purpose, boosts self-esteem and enables financial independence (1)
- Worklessness is associated with poor physical and mental health and increased risk of self-harm (2)
- The risk of falling out of work increases steeply with the length of time someone has been on sick leave
- After six months of sick leave, the probability of a person not being able to return to work is approximately 50% (3)
- Return to work is an effective part of rehabilitation from many illnesses and is important to patients (3)

Symptoms of long-COVID which commonly impact on function and may impede return to work

- Fatigue, shortness of breath, chest pain and neurocognitive impairment (3)
- These symptoms may also impede travel to work



- An individual does not need to be 100% fit to return to work (3)
- If a person has ongoing symptoms which are impairing their function, they might not be able to return to their work without workplace adjustments or adjustments to their travel to work (3)
- Many people work effectively despite significant illness or disability, mainly if they are provided with suitable support in the workplace (3)

Practical steps for managers and employers

Background information

- Some people who have had COVID-19 continue to have symptoms for four weeks or longer after they have recovered from the immediate illness
- Diagnosis of long-COVID is not dependent on having had a positive test for COVID-19
- Long-Covid is a new illness and evidence on how to treat it is rapidly emerging and evolving
- NHS support is available for people recovering from COVID-19 (5) (www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk)

Health and work

- It is important that you, as the employer, keep in touch with your employee who is on sick leave. An empathetic phone or video call from their line-manager in the first week or two of absence to enquire about their well-being is a good start
- Take time to listen to your employee and to understand their difficulties and concerns
- Explore whether they would they benefit from any health services that you as an employer provide, for example, occupational health/Employee Assistance Programme/physiotherapy /psychological support
- At this first meeting (virtual or in person) it may be useful to arrange a time for the next meeting
- Follow-up meetings should touch on return to work, in a supportive manner, with an emphasis on exploring with the employee what their obstacles to return to work are and how these may be overcome
- As the manager, you may wish to consider how you might be able to help the employee overcoming these obstacles, for exempling facilitating adjustments to work
- Employees do not need to be 100% fit to return to work. A supportive return to work programme can be beneficial to the recovery process
- You should take into account the type of work the employee does, for example shift work may be difficult if poor sleep or fatigue is one of their symptoms.
Is their work safety critical?
If so, can they return to work safely?
If not, can they temporarily be redeployed to another role?
- As an employer you may wish to seek independent, professional advice from an occupational health provider. Occupational health can assist in assessing an employee's medical fitness to return to work to a given job role and can advise on adjustments which would allow the employee to return to work safely

Adjustments to Work

Access to Work is a publicly funded employment support programme which can pay for practical support to help employees remain in work. They may pay for special equipment, help with travel and help with working from home (<https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>)

The symptoms of long-COVID fluctuate and adjustments may need to be reviewed on a weekly basis

Examples of Adjustments

- Alteration in number of days or hours worked
- Shorter days, more breaks, later starts or earlier finishes
- Change of hours to avoid travelling at peak times
- Time off work to attend medical appointments
- Access to rest area
- Home working (for all or part of the working week)
- Phased return to work, gradually increasing the days/ hours worked over a period of several weeks
- Temporary transfer from night or shift working to regular daytime hours (if applicable)

Supplementary Guidance

- NICE guidance COVID-19 rapid guideline: managing the long-term effects of COVID-19
- NICE guideline [NG188] (6)
- Your COVID recovery (5)
- Access to work (7)
- Job Accommodation Network (<https://askjan.org>)

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