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LONG COVID SCOTLAND

LONG COVID SUPPORT

COVID-19 return to work guide

For recovering workers

This leaflet offers guidance for workers from Occupational Health Professionals on how to manage getting back to work after COVID-19 infection and Long COVID.

Occupational Health Professionals specialise in health and work and have professional experience in helping people get back to work after illness. OH Professionals also help to prevent people being made sick by their work.

This leaflet is relevant to those who are in a job already, and those of you who are looking for work or starting a new job.

1. 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. For many people, the infection lasts a couple of days, though it is common to last two–four weeks. We call this 'acute' COVID.

'Long COVID' is a term which is used after four weeks if your symptoms continue and prevent you from doing normal activities. The Office for National Statistics estimates that one in five people have symptoms after five weeks, and one in ten have symptoms for twelve weeks or longer after acute COVID-19 infection. An Independent SAGE Report on Long COVID was published in January 2021 and further sets out the symptoms, prevalence and management of the condition. This report can be viewed here.

A word of reassurance: although recovery from COVID-19 can be slow, many people improve with time, and treatments are improving as more is known. Returning to work is part of the recovery even if it must be flexible or on a phased return 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 working remotely in addition to 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 wellbeing.

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.

2. DURING THE ILLNESS

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 for ten days from when your symptoms first started
- you should contact your manager to let them know you will be absent (or follow your 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 'fit note', also called '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. Due to restrictions on face-to-face GP appointments, a 'fit note' may currently not be necessary and an NHS 111 email may be sufficient

> ***Note:*** *the information on your 'fit note' should be an agreement between you and the doctor (GP or hospital specialist) who writes it. Your health information is confidential to you, but it does help to give a simple explanation. In some jobs e.g. the NHS, writing COVID-19 on the 'fit note' helps to ensure that you are paid correctly during your absence*

- the reason you need to be off work. Something simple and general is enough, like "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, video link or face-to-face. You can agree with your manager which method
- that some people will have continuing symptoms such as fatigue for a few weeks, others may have effects of the infection which take longer to recover. Other common symptoms are 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 your GP
- that Long COVID can have unusual patterns: relapses, phases with new, sometimes bizarre symptoms
- that an initially mild case can be followed by later severe problems that can impact markedly on day-to-day activities
- that Long COVID can last for many months
- that you may need help with accessing healthcare tests and scans that would speed a return to work.

Do not hold back from asking for this.

The 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 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.
- Some businesses can facilitate your return to work by agreeing to pay for healthcare tests, scans, or medical appointments you are otherwise unable to access.
- The manager needs to understand that you do not need a positive test for the diagnosis of COVID-19. It can be diagnosed by symptoms.

3. 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 videoconference is appropriate during the pandemic)
- once back at work, as soon as possible arrange a review (may also need to be by tele- or videoconference)
- review workloads and ensure you will not be under excessive pressure
- it can be helpful to involve Human Resources partners or union representatives.

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 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 to see an Occupational Physician or Advisor (Nurse specialist).
- 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 is for later).

4. 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 'phased return'. Phased returns can be adapted as you go along. After COVID-19, we are finding that people need a much longer phased return than the average four weeks.

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

There are no limits to the types of adjustment that could happen, and these are best worked out and discussed between you and your manager. As Occupational Physicians, we have seen the best results when the employer 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.

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.

- 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')
- Support
    - Clear line of supervision - 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
- 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 medical conditions which are likely to be considered a disability, the employer may have extra legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments (in the UK, under The Equality Act 2010).

5. HOW CAN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICES HELP YOU?

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

- carry out an individualised health risk assessment
- they are experienced in assessing employees with new conditions, poorly understood conditions, and at evaluating the impact of symptoms on functioning
- can do an individualised workplace/task risk assessment with you and your line manager
- will consider your safety and that of your co-workers
- put 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:

- 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.

6. THE 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
- Health and Safety at Work obligations
- Disability and other Equality policies

COVID-19 is a new illness; therefore this is an interim document which will be updated as new information arrives.

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