

CIPD

*Championing better
work and working lives*



WORKING WITH LONG COVID

Guide for employees
working with long COVID

Guide
March 2022

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 160,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Introduction to this guide

An estimated 1.3 million people were experiencing long COVID as at January 2022. Some have ongoing symptoms that are serious enough to prevent them from working. Many others feel able to do some work but say they experience barriers that prevent them from returning to work, or working well on their return.

As a new, potentially serious, health condition, many people with long COVID face a period of great uncertainty as they wait for confirmation of a diagnosis and an effective management plan. Many individuals often return to work too quickly. Consequently, their return to work is less likely to be sustainable and there are longer-term risks to their health.

Having a long-term health condition such as long COVID can have a big impact on how someone feels about being able to return to work, and their ability to stay in work. However, this impact can be lessened when work is designed and managed in a supportive and flexible way by your employer.

This guide is designed to help employees with long COVID to access the appropriate workplace support to help them return to, and stay in, work.

This guide has been developed by Affinity Health at Work, the University of Sheffield and the CIPD, and outlines practical recommendations developed from the CIPD Working with long COVID research. It draws on evidence and research with returning workers, line managers, occupational health, employment advisers, and rehabilitation professionals as well as HR professionals and the Long Covid Support group.

What is long COVID?

Long COVID is defined by NICE as *'signs and symptoms that develop during or following an infection consistent with COVID-19 which continue for more than 12 weeks and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis'*.

Commonly reported symptoms include:

- Fatigue
- Breathlessness
- Brain fog and poor concentration
- Short-term memory loss
- Slurred speech
- Chest pain
- Muscle and joint pain
- Headaches
- Sore throat
- Vertigo
- Hair loss and changes
- Digestive difficulties
- Autoimmune conditions
- Insomnia
- Heart rate changes
- Blood pressure changes
- Loss of taste
- Loss of smell
- Menstrual changes/early menopause
- Poor skin
- Depression
- Anxiety

Everyone's experience of long COVID is unique to them. Symptoms can be unpredictable and fluctuate over time, so you may have a period of recovery followed by a sudden relapse, sometimes with new or different symptoms. A relapse is most likely when people push themselves to perform to the level they did before they were ill. Long COVID symptoms can last for many months, and recovery can be very slow.

To find out more about long COVID, see our report [Working with long COVID](#).

What can you do to stay well at work with long COVID?

Returning to work and staying well at work with long COVID can be hard, but you don't need to do it all on your own.

If you are returning to work after a period of absence, you are likely to be experiencing mixed feelings. You might be looking forward to returning to a sense of normality, but may also feel apprehensive about how you will manage your work and whether you will be able to maintain your health when back at work. Many people with long COVID need to return to work slowly, gradually building up their work hours and tasks over months.

Ask for and agree helpful workplace adjustments

Some people may require adjustments to their job role, work environment or work schedule to manage their long COVID symptoms while working. Once an employer is aware of an employee's health or disability information, they have a legal duty to consider making reasonable adjustments. But even if your symptoms don't meet the legal threshold to be considered a disability, many employers will be willing to make suitable workplace adjustments to enable you to return to your job. Hopefully, your manager will offer to discuss these as part of the return-to-work process if you have been off sick with long COVID. If not, think about what changes will help you to manage your job in a sustainable way and ask to discuss these with your manager or with HR.

If your organisation offers access to occupational health services, you could also discuss adjustments with them. A conversation is the best way to identify what workplace support is needed to help you to manage your symptoms and carry on working.

The type of adjustment(s) you need will differ depending on many factors, including the nature of your job and your unique health needs. As the symptoms of long COVID can be many and varied, and also fluctuate over time, you may need different work adjustments at different times.

CIPD research on [working with long COVID](#) identifies a number of work adjustments that have helped people with long COVID to stay in work. These include:

- home or hybrid working
- flexible working times
- reduced or off-peak commuting time

- making work tasks physically, mentally or cognitively less demanding
- a quiet space for downtime during the working day.

Many people with a long-term health condition like long COVID learn over time about the most effective ways to manage their symptoms. This means you are often in the best position to know what adjustments or support can help you in your job.

Helpful COVID-19 resources

[NHS advice on long COVID](#)

[NHS: Your COVID Recovery](#)

[The Long COVID Support group](#)

[Society of Occupational Medicine COVID-19 return to work guide for recovering workers](#)

Use the IGLOO checklist to get the right support

If you are working with long COVID, there are certain things that can help you manage your health and work. This includes:

- Individual actions
- Group actions by your colleagues
- Line manager actions
- actions taken by your Organisation
- help and support from Outside your organisation.

We call this your *IGLOO for working with long COVID*.

Use this checklist to see what you can do to strengthen your IGLOO to stay well at work. Read the statements in the 'Individual actions' category and the 'Do I...' column. Answer 'yes', 'no' or 'sometimes', marking your answer in the column.

Checklist to support the IGLOO for working with long COVID

Actions for IGLOO level	Do I...? Yes, No, Sometimes	I need to... If you answered 'sometimes' or 'no', what else would be helpful?	I can make this happen by... Need help and advice? Ask friends and family, HR, occupational health, colleagues, charity/support groups, union reps and so on.
Individual level			
Do I... pace myself and recognise when I need to rest?			
Do I... share with others how my symptoms sometimes impact my ability to complete work tasks?			
Do I... know about my <u>employment rights</u> in relation to my condition and how to ask for adjustments that might help me?			
Group level			
Do I... provide information to colleagues on long COVID so that they are aware of how it might impact me and my work?			
Do I... get help from others on challenging tasks when needed? And do I let them help when help is offered?			
Do I... get treated in the same way as I did before, not someone who is different or damaged?			
Do I... work in a team where wellbeing is a priority, where we can talk openly about our health and wellbeing?			
Line manager level			
Do I... feel that my line manager understands the fluctuating nature of long COVID and is patient when my condition impacts my work?			
Do I... receive support and access to work adjustments from my line manager on an ongoing basis?			
Do I... discuss with my line manager what information is communicated to colleagues so that I know what has been said about me?			
Do I... find it easy to check-in regularly with my line manager?			
Organisational level			
Do I... know what the absence management policy and processes are and how they can accommodate fluctuating conditions like long COVID?			
Do I... have access to flexible and creative work adjustments to help me manage my health and work?			
Do I... receive support and adjustments based on my symptoms, not my diagnosis (which may take some time)?			
Do I... work in a company where inclusion and wellbeing are prioritised? If not, could I share information on the benefits of <u>wellbeing at work</u> to start the conversation in my organisation?			
Outside level			
Do I... have access to support outside of the organisation, for example: access to occupational health, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, long COVID clinics, vocational support, psychological therapies, charities, for example the Long Covid Support group?			

Remember

Working with long COVID is not always easy, but having support from your manager, colleagues and the wider organisation can make a huge difference. If you're not sure what you would find helpful, talk through the checklist with your line manager, or a trusted colleague, and identify some concrete actions that you can take to help you stay well at work.



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