



# Returning to work successfully after Long COVID

Most people who contract the COVID-19 virus, experience symptoms that resolve within a few weeks. However, for some people, symptoms can continue for weeks or months after the initial infection and this is now referred to as Long COVID.

Long Covid can affect the whole body and symptoms vary between people. The most commonly reported symptoms are:

- **Fatigue**
- **Breathlessness**
- **Chest pain**
- **Difficulty focusing on tasks**
- **Joint and muscle pain**
- **Low mood and anxiety**

Long COVID is a new condition, so our knowledge and understanding continues to evolve. It's still unclear why some people develop these chronic problems and others don't. Surprisingly, recent research found no link between the severity of the initial infection and whether a person will develop Long COVID. In fact, some Long COVID sufferers were initially asymptomatic.

Companies are facing significant challenges trying to manage occupational health problems related to Long COVID. It is important to recognise that it is a long-term condition with widespread effects and that employees may need extended recovery time. It can be challenging returning to work after Long COVID due to the nature of the symptoms, and relapse is common if the process is not carefully managed.



## What managers can do to support employees with Long COVID

Returning to work is an important part of recovery and managers can help support this process by:-

- Keeping in regular contact with the employee whilst they are off sick to offer support. This can reduce anxiety, help them feel connected to the workplace and allow them to focus on recovery
- Considering a phased return-to-work. This can help the employee build stamina, facilitate continued recovery and reduce the risk of further sickness absence
- Meeting with the employee before their return, to talk through a sustainable return-to-work process
- Taking a flexible approach when considering hours, shift times, additional breaks and/or modified duties
- Providing extra support for the first few shifts. This period can be particularly challenging as employees re-adjust to their workplace demands
- Recognising that Long COVID symptoms can come and go. Sufferers often have good and bad days, and relapses are common if they overdo things
- Regularly reviewing progress and monitoring general wellbeing
- Referring to Occupational Health Physiotherapy early in order to facilitate the return-to-work process



## How Occupational Health Physiotherapy can help

Physiotherapists are experienced in helping people return to work following illness and can support an employee with Long COVID by:

- Carrying out an individualised health assessment to evaluate how symptoms are affecting function and work-related tasks
  - Supporting the employee with symptom management strategies
  - Helping the employee to pace, prioritise and plan their workloads to avoid relapse
  - Recommending workplace adjustments and offering guidance on a phased return-to-work schedule
  - Reviewing manual handling techniques or carrying out a DSE Assessment where appropriate
- Sharing the latest evidence-based advice and guidance on managing Long COVID

Long COVID sufferers have had a difficult time adjusting to life with persistent, debilitating symptoms. It is not surprising that many employees feel anxious about returning to work and how they will cope. Involving an Occupational Health Physiotherapist early, recognising the nature of Long COVID symptoms, and clear communication with the employee, can help ensure a successful return-to-work process and avoid future sickness absence.

For further information or to find out how Back in Action UK can help your employees with long covid successfully return to work, then email us [enquiries@backinactionuk.com](mailto:enquiries@backinactionuk.com)