

Returning to work after Covid-19 infection and Post-Acute COVID-19 Syndrome (PACS)

This leaflet offers guidance from an occupational physician on how to manage getting back to work after Covid-19 infection and Post-Acute COVID-19 Syndrome (PACS). Occupational Physicians were once known as ‘industry doctors’ or ‘factory doctors’ and have much experience in helping people get back to work after illness. Our job is also to prevent people being made sick by their work.

MUTUAL CO-OPERATION

After the extraordinary stresses – both physical and psychological – of suffering a severe Covid-19 infection and/or PACS, it can be really tough to get back to work. You may still be struggling with day-to-day activities, but you need to work for both financial and social reasons.

At the same time, the pandemic has been a really hard time for employers, too. They have had to rapidly alter how work is organised to make the environment safe for workers and customers. They have been struggling with numbers of people off sick, and have needed to be very flexible. A large number of people may be affected in a single organisation. This will have a long-term impact and employers will need to prioritise their core business needs.

With all this in mind, it makes sense for employers and employees to work together towards a return to work that is the most productive for all concerned.

DURING THE ILLNESS

As a patient suffering from PACS you need to give some information to your manager and explain

- how long you have been advised to stay off work, and provide a ‘sick note’ or ‘return to work note/plan’.
- 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. Your health information is confidential to you but it does help to give a simple explanation.
- that PACS 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 you may need help with accessing healthcare tests and scans that would speed a return to work. Don’t hold back from asking for financial help with these

The manager’s role:

- It is really good practice for your manager to keep in contact when you are off sick, even this is just a telephone call once a month, 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.
- 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. "Validation is a basic human need for psychological health."
- It may be that they can speed 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.

RETURNING TO WORK

Returning to work meeting

A manager should

- hold a meeting with you before returning to work to talk about all of this and ask how they can support you.
- Arrange to review you (by telephone or video-conference is appropriate during the pandemic)
- Review workloads and ensure you will not be under excessive pressure

Medical clearance before returning to work

This will depend on your job role.

- If you have had a heart or lung problem due to COVID-19 and your work involves heavy lifting or other exertion, then you must have Cardiorespiratory medical checks before returning to significant workplace exertion.
- 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 which have been aggravated by Covid-19, any previous work restrictions must be reviewed.

Adjustments to work duties

This should be a discussion between you and your managers.

- Do make suggestions, based on your experience and knowledge of your health condition and your job.
- Take advice from your doctors on anything you should and shouldn't do, and if uncertain, ask to see an Occupational Physician or Advisor (Nurse specialist).
- A workplace can make many adjustments to your duties, temporarily, to help you back to work. (If it turns out that you may need permanent changes to your work, that is for later.)

Examples of **adjustments** to work duties

Phased return to work

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 adjusted as you go along, and because PACS has often lasted for months, you may need to take longer than average. If you have been off work after COVID-19, we are finding that people need a much longer phased return than the average 4 weeks.

We are finding that PACS has a tendency to relapse if people overdo exertion, and you should be guided by your symptoms.

There is no limit to the types of adjustments that could happen and these are best imagined and discussed between you and your manager. Don't be afraid to make suggestions. The manager may not be able to accommodate everything.

Other examples of workplace adjustments:

The adjustments you need will need to be tailored to you as an individual, and depend on what your health problems are and how they affect your ability to do things.

Alteration to timings (starts, finishes, and breaks)

- Altered hours e.g., shorter days, days off between work days
- Alteration to workload
 - e.g., fewer tasks than normal within a time period
 - More time to complete usual tasks
- Patterns of working e.g., need for regular breaks
- Temporary changes to duties or tasks ("altered tasks")
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- 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
- If your health condition is fluctuating it is useful to tell your manager this
- If you have medical conditions which are likely to be a disability, the employer may have extra legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments. (In UK, under The Equality Act)

Access to Occupational Health Services (OHS)

OHS recognised early on that duration of illness was long and that early return caused relapse. They can help in the following ways:

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

- They can commission health surveillance and rehabilitation programmes

If you work for a large organisation, find out if they provide

- Counselling helpline
- Rehabilitation e.g., physiotherapy
- Practical support, on issues such as childcare and long-term health conditions, to help people to get and keep jobs.

THE EMPLOYER'S OVERALL RESPONSIBILITIES

Here are some points to look out for in your employer's attitude to its work force. Good employers should have the following in place:

- General policies to ensure 'good work' for all.
- A policy on sickness absence.

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