

CIPD

Guide
November 2024

Working with long COVID

Guide for managers to support
employees with long COVID

The CIPD has been championing better work and working lives for over 100 years. It helps organisations thrive by focusing on their people, supporting our economies and societies. It's the professional body for HR, L&D, OD and all people professionals – experts in people, work and change. With over 160,000 members globally – and a growing community using its research, insights and learning – it gives trusted advice and offers independent thought leadership. It's a leading voice in the call for good work that creates value for everyone.

Supporting an employee with long COVID to return to and stay in work is important for their recovery, for your team and for your organisation. Employees are more likely to return to and stay in work when they are well supported by their line manager.

Why we need to support employees with long COVID

The issue

Long COVID is a significant long-term health condition which can have an impact on an employee's productivity at work and their ability to stay in work.

Many people with long COVID face uncertainty as they wait for a diagnosis and an effective management plan. Returning to work too quickly can have longer-term health risks and make their return to work less likely to be sustainable.

Supporting people's health and wellbeing is the right thing to do and part of ensuring that people feel safe and valued at work. If an employee is given the support and flexibility they need to manage their long COVID symptoms, they are more likely to perform at their best and help to achieve the team's objectives.

What is long COVID?

Definition

'Long COVID' is commonly used to refer to Post-COVID 19 syndrome. Post-COVID-19 syndrome is defined by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK (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

The most commonly reported symptoms of long COVID are fatigue and 'brain fog' (affecting thinking, memory, speech and concentration). Other common symptoms include, but are not limited to, shortness of breath, pain (muscle, joints, chest), headaches, digestive issues, difficulty sleeping and poor mental health (anxiety, depression).

Everyone's experience of long COVID is unique to them

Symptoms can be unpredictable and fluctuate, so your team member 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.

Shared responsibility for supporting employees with long COVID

Everyone has a role to play

The IGLOO framework for thriving at work, developed by the University of Sheffield and Affinity Health at Work, outlines the different resources at the individual level, the group level, the leader/line manager level and the organisational level that can help an employee when managing a long-term health condition such as long COVID.

When people are unwell or have a health condition that requires ongoing management, there are certain things that can help them manage their health and work. The CIPD report [working with long COVID](#) identifies a number of recommendations, which form the IGLOO framework. These include:

- Individual actions
- Group actions by their colleagues
- Line manager actions
- Actions taken by their organisation
- Help and support from outside their organisation.

IGLOO checklist

Use the IGLOO checklist [below](#) to see what you can do to help your team members with long COVID. Read the statements in the 'Do I...' column, answering 'yes', 'no' or 'sometimes' and marking your answer in the column provided.

You can also share the IGLOO checklist with employees with long COVID and, with the employee's agreement, with their colleagues to help your team support those with long COVID.

Work adjustments and support

It's important to understand what your role is in supporting and managing people with a health condition such as long COVID, and maintain clear boundaries. For example, you are there to provide support, but you are not a medical expert or counsellor. This means helping employees access the work adjustments and support they need to manage their health and work safely and effectively, as well as signposting to specialist sources of support such as occupational health or an employee assistance programme if available.

What you do and how you behave can affect:

- whether the employee feels able to take steps to manage their condition in work
- how early action is taken to help prevent symptoms worsening or recurring
- ultimately, whether someone is able to stay in work.

Supporting someone with an ongoing health condition can be challenging. It is worth considering what support is available within your organisation, such as expert advice from HR on people management policies or from occupational health on medical issues if available. Debrief sessions with your own manager might also be helpful (with confidentiality and no specific case details) as well as regular wellbeing conversations and catch-ups.

Remember that once an employer is aware of an employee's health or disability information they have a legal duty to consider making reasonable adjustments.

How to manage and support someone with long COVID

Understand your organisation's policies, procedures and support

Make sure you understand your organisation's framework for managing and supporting employees with a long-term health conditions. This includes health and people management policies, procedures for making workplace adjustments and managing sickness absence, and the support available such as occupational health or an employee assistance programme.

Manage absence and return to work with compassion and flexibility

Absence and return to work are often managed as a one-off event, but many employees with long COVID will need to take multiple absences as their condition fluctuates over time.

Taking a flexible, compassionate and individualised approach to sickness absence can help prevent unhealthy presenteeism (working when unwell).

If your team member is returning to work after a period of absence, they might be looking forward to a sense of normality, but may also feel apprehensive. Many people with long COVID need to return to work slowly, gradually building up their work hours and tasks over a period of months.

The CIPD guide [on managing a return to work after long-term absence](#) sets out guiding principles to follow when navigating an effective return to work:

1. maintaining communication while absent
2. preparing for a return to work
3. supporting the employee during the immediate return
4. supporting the employee on an ongoing basis on return.

Employees are more likely to return to work safely, productively and sustainably following a period of sickness absence if they are well supported during their absence and on their return.

Discuss and implement helpful workplace adjustments

Some employees may require adjustments to their job role, work environment or work schedule to manage their long COVID symptoms while working. Ensuring employees have access to work adjustments can help them to continue to be productive at work.

The type of adjustment(s) will differ depending on many factors, including the nature of the employee's job and their unique needs. As the symptoms of long COVID can be many and varied and also fluctuate, different work adjustments may be needed at different times.

It's important to recognise that you do not need to be an expert on long COVID – it's a relatively new and complex condition. It's more important to show good people management skills, including sensitivity, empathy and understanding.

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 the employee is often in the best position to know what adjustments or support can help them in their job. This could be particularly challenging for people with long COVID, however, because they could experience unpredictable or new symptoms.

You should discuss and agree any adjustments with the employee. CIPD research on working with long COVID identifies a number of work adjustments or conditions that have helped employees 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 wellbeing room for downtime during the working day
- a supportive organisational culture.

Have ongoing supportive and empathetic conversations

Many people find it challenging to tell others about their health. For someone with long COVID, this could be even more challenging because they may not be able to obtain a clear diagnosis or treatment pathway.

Everyone's experience of long COVID is unique to them. Symptoms can vary from mild to severe and some require changes to their job or working pattern. Conversations will help to identify what workplace support is needed to help the employee to manage their symptoms and carry on working.

A regular catch-up or one-to-one is an opportunity to continue to show your support for someone when they have returned to work. Remember, recovery from long COVID can be slow and unpredictable, and some people may need ongoing support. Ask simple, open and non-judgemental questions to give the employee ample opportunity to explain their health situation in their own words.

Developing your capacity to build and sustain relationships, particularly around showing concern for people and interacting with them in a friendly way, can help with this.

Listening, treating people with respect and bringing kindness and consistency will help you provide this support, as will your capacity to build and sustain relationships, while skill at handling conflict and people management issues may also be needed.

The CIPD [people managers' guide to supporting mental health at work](#) has useful tips and a conversation checklist that can be followed when having a conversation about someone's health and its impact on their work.

Acknowledgements

Authors

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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... help my colleague to pace themselves and encourage them to rest when they need to?			
Do I... encourage my colleague to share with me (where they feel comfortable) how their symptoms impact their ability to complete certain work tasks?			
Do I... know where and how to signpost information about their <u>employment rights</u> in relation to their condition?			
Group actions by colleague's level			
Do I... understand what long COVID is and how it might impact my colleague at work?			
Do I... offer practical support, such as offering to help with challenging tasks?			
Do I... treat my colleague in the same way as I did before, not as someone who is different or damaged?			
Do I... encourage our whole team to prioritise and talk openly about our health and wellbeing?			
Line manager level			
Do I... think that my line manager is aware of what long COVID is and how it can impact on my colleague's health and work?			
Do I... accept that my line manager may have made individualised work adjustments for my colleague to help them manage their health and work?			
Do I... check in with my line manager about what my colleague wants me to know about how long COVID impacts them?			
Do I... look out to make sure my colleague is having regular wellbeing checks 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... support my colleague to access flexible and creative work adjustments to support their health and work?			
Do I... see that my colleague receives support and adjustments based on their symptoms, not their 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... know where my colleague can access 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?			

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