

Covid-19 Managing Long Covid

Introduction

Months after being infected with Covid-19, people are still suffering with symptoms commonly known as ‘long Covid’ and this guidance will support the management of these situations within your business.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virus was commonly perceived to cause a relatively short-term illness for many, and for the majority this has been and continues to be the case. The NHS advise ‘for most people with Covid-19, they feel better in 3 weeks’, however a growing number of people are reporting symptoms that are lasting for months.

The twist in the ever-evolving journey of the pandemic will bring about new challenges for businesses. Already operations have been adapted to make workplaces and working practices Covid-19 secure, finding ways to adapt to the confirmed Covid cases and those needing to self-isolate. And now, considering how to respond to those struggling to return to work after becoming ill, and struggling with long Covid.

Long Covid is thought to affect 10% of people – including those as a result of mild cases of Covid-19.

Although there are no formal guidelines for how businesses should respond, long Covid has similarities with many chronic conditions and may eventually be covered by the Equality Act 2010. As such, businesses are encouraged to work with HR and occupational health teams, along with affected individuals to manage their return to work.

What is long Covid?

As with the development of vaccines and treatments of Covid-19, our understanding of long Covid is developing at a rapid pace.

It’s understood that the following symptoms can be associated with long Covid, although this list is not exhaustive;

heart palpitations	feeling sick &/or diarrhoea,	headaches
chest pain or tightness	stomach aches	depression and anxiety
pins and needles	loss of appetite	difficulty sleeping (insomnia)
joint pain	high temperature	extreme tiredness (fatigue)
tinnitus, earaches	cough or sore throat	problems with memory and concentration (‘brain fog’)
shortness of breath	changes to sense of smell or taste	dizziness
rashes		

The above description of the disease is continuously reviewed by professionals, along with treatment and management of long Covid, with a definition posted 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'

Importantly, the definition does not assume that a patient has previously tested positive for Covid-19, the diagnosis can be based with or without a test and can be made retrospectively based on a suspected Covid-19 infection.

Responsibilities of the Company

Commitment is required to encourage and facilitate equal opportunities for all employees. Recognising the needs of individual employees, who are suffering from long Covid may vary and will require careful assessment of each case.

The following steps may be used to support employees suffering with long Covid, along with any individual support following a personal illness;

- raise awareness of long Covid, associated symptoms etc.
- establish strong communication channels to encourage employees to discuss any specific circumstance
- providing equipment and facilities to support and assist employees suffering from long Covid in carrying out their duties
- ensuring that the needs of employees, arising directly or indirectly because of their work, are met
- ensuring the working environment is Covid-safe, and generally a safe operational site

Specific reasonable adjustments to the working day may also be considered, which could include any the following terms;

- temporary home working
- temporary flexible working
- temporary change or reduction of duties

Reviews of working arrangements and employee duties should be regularly undertaken to determine if any developments have occurred that require attention. This attention may consist of retraining; adjustments to the premises; revisions to the reasonable adjustments; or other changes the Company needs to make for the provision of assistance as necessary.

The review is recommended to be undertaken by their manager, in conjunction with HR.

It may be necessary to consider training, retraining or redeployment for an employee if they are unable to continue to carry out their duties. It may also be that suitable alternative employment is available should reasonable adjustments not be appropriate. The Company are to make every effort to avoid termination, by providing necessary training and support, and considering redeployment. The employee is to be involved in the consultation process throughout.

Employee Responsibilities

All employees are responsible for making themselves aware of the actions they need to take to comply with Company policy, relating to personal illness.

Employees who feel they are suffering with long Covid, or who have been diagnosed with it are encouraged to raise this with their line manager, so the Company can ensure the appropriate support is provided.

The Company should maintain regular communication with staff who have previously tested positive for Covid-19, to ascertain their recovery and discuss issues that may arise.

Also, if an employee feels they are no longer suffering from the symptoms of long Covid, they are encouraged to disclose this to their line manager. The Company should review at this stage, removal of temporary adjustments to their working day if this is appropriate, which may have been introduced as a result of long Covid. Again, full consultation must be held with the employee prior to any decisions being made.

Sickness absence due to long Covid

If employees are absent for reasons relating to Covid or long Covid, it's recommended they notify their line manager on the first day of the absence. Usual absence notification procedures should then be followed, along with the Company policy on sickness absence and pay, whatever agreement applies.

Upon their return to work, the employee should be invited to meetings, to assess their situation and evaluate if any steps can be taken to support them. If medical opinion is available, such as a GP or Occupational Health Practitioner report, and if this recommends a phased return to work, this should be explored.

The implications of long Covid and its changing nature, should be taken into account during ongoing employment decisions made during periods of sickness absence and if this becomes a recurring issue.

Currently, where chronic illnesses can be defined as a physical or mental impairment that have a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on a person's ability to perform normal daily activities, they are covered by the Equality Act 2010. Currently, suffering an acute Covid-19 infection does not meet this definition; however, long Covid might.

Options for Employers

While the symptoms of long Covid should not be belittled, it must be remembered that long-term and chronic conditions are not a new phenomenon and that many examples of best practice already exist.

A [study from Loughborough University](#) looking at mental and physical wellbeing among employees reporting different chronic illnesses showed that workplace support was critical in helping people manage their symptoms. Specifically, it demonstrated that where employers worked with their staff to help them overcome any limitations, individuals were much better at managing their illness, as well as their work.

Accordingly, where employees are suffering with suspected long Covid, employers should bring on board HR and Occupational Health teams to work with the individual to develop personalised assessments which include adequate provisions for returning to work. This might involve a phased return, as well as a degree of flexibility to allow staff to manage the variations in their condition.

Maintaining an open-minded and compassionate approach will be key to any strategy. For example, although work is ongoing within the medical profession, and Government is setting up initiative such as long Covid clinics, the illness is still poorly understood. This might mean that it is difficult for staff to get a diagnosis, it is likely there will be geographical differences in access to support and, at first, doctors may find it hard to provide advice.

As with many other aspects of the pandemic, this 'newness' also means that the attitude of managers and workplaces will be crucial. Managers who are 'good listeners' to problems and provide an inclusive and non-judgmental response will develop inclusive, stronger and more resilient teams – undoubtedly a much-needed asset in these most challenging of times.