

Supporting the Physical and Mental Health of Employees who are Working from Home


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Occupational Health Professionals:

- specialise in health and work and have professional expertise in helping people return to work after illness.
- have working knowledge of the workplace and are best placed to advise on workplace health and prevent people being made sick by their work

- YouGov survey of 755 British parents with children 18 or under, who were either working or on flexi-furlough¹ in August 2021.
- Wide gulf in peoples' experiences of flexible, family friendly working, and consequently how being a parent impacts on their working life.
- Over half of working parents agree that their organisation supports parents and people with caring responsibilities effectively (54%).



Many working parents believe the pandemic has brought beneficial to their place of work, with two fifths (41%) agreeing that the pandemic has had a positive impact on workplace culture at their organisation, and half (50%) saying open conversations about wellbeing and mental health are now more accepted.

However, almost two fifths (38%) report that those at their organisation who work the longest hours are most respected by senior leaders, more than one in five (22%) admit to hiding time off for childcare from their manager, and a third (35%) agree that being a parent and having caring responsibilities holds them back from promotion at work, rising to 41% of women

Home working

The coronavirus pandemic shifted various work practices, one of which was a transition for individuals from working in an office environment to working from home.

Home workers can be considered as those who homework occasionally (ad-hoc), those who homework regularly (50% of time), or those who homework permanently (100% of time).

Employees who are asked to work from home have to be supported to do so.

Download Home Working and DSE during COVID-19 Factsheet [here](#).

Home working guide from HSE:
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/home.htm> and
[Working alone - Health and safety guidance on the risks of lone working \(hse.gov.uk\)](#)

Support required when working from home

Many employers will have working at home policies, which may reflect:

- Carrying out a risk assessment to include suitability of the employee's home for homeworking
- Putting in place any reasonable adjustment that the employee requires
- Providing DSE training - outlining the risks associated with using DSE and ensuring appropriate and safe working practices to prevent DSE related health problems
- Maintaining equipment as needed and purchasing new equipment when required

Policies should consider other ways the organisation can support the worker

Perhaps:

- Paying for an employee's broadband or supplying paper for a printer
- Contributing to electricity, gas, telephone bills?

Those employees who work from home on a regular or permanent basis should ensure they check their home insurance and mortgage policies about specific clauses that cover working from home or not

- Clearly state the arrangements for storing, using and securing confidential data held at workers' home, with the employer opting to provide a locked cabinet, or appropriate online secure storage, e.g. cloud. Employees have to ensure all data are protected



Maintaining regular contact with employees



Work is good for us and we need good, safe jobs - comfortable when we are well and supportive when we are not.



Managers should provide workplace support, with referral to occupational health (OH) professionals when necessary. Question to ask:



How has life been?



How we can make your job better?



Do you know who to talk with if any problems crop up?

Managers should:

- encourage reasonable and frequent contact between team members throughout the working day
- ensure that work outputs and processes are clearly discussed and agreed
- support social connections to occur and to be sustained - recreate the usual workplace social bonds
- send out clear meeting etiquette guidelines

Policies should consider other ways the organisation can support the worker

- Maintaining clear and informative communication about the organisation – updates, events, changes
- Providing support systems to address feelings of isolation, loneliness and helplessness

If there are health issues

1. Early contact that is positive and caring

2. Use conversation starters to establish rapport and discuss problems

3. If obstacles are too complex, refer to occupational health for help

Conversation starters for line managers or OH include:

Do you feel up to doing your usual job with your health problem?

What parts of your job will you find difficult because of your health problem?

What can we change to help overcome the difficulties?

1. [Supporting businesses to build back better: The benefits of age diversity](#)
2. [Supporting your approach to workplace diversity and inclusion](#)
3. [Creating better quality work and workplaces](#)
4. [Managing stress, burnout and fatigue in health and social care](#)
5. [Supporting workplace mental health and wellbeing in COVID-19 and beyond](#)
6. [Developing a COVID-19 secure mental health and wellbeing strategy](#)
7. [Managing change – restructuring, redundancy, and homeworking](#)

SOM with Public Health England on COVID-19 Work, worklessness and wellbeing factsheets

Negative impact if appropriate systems and training are not in place

On the individual:

- Eyestrain, visual fatigue, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), work-related stress
- work-related anxiety
- work related fatigue
- increase in sickness absence,
- increase in presenteeism

On the organisation:

- increase in sickness absence
- increase in presenteeism
- reduced productivity
- reduced performance
- lower morale,
- lower trust in organisation

Long Covid - what is it?

Signs and symptoms that develop during or following an infection consistent with COVID-19 that last longer than four weeks and which are not explained by an alternative diagnosis, according to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE).

No need for a positive test for COVID-19 to meet the diagnostic criteria.

NICE published [guidance on Long COVID](#) in December 2020 in which common symptoms are described. The symptoms fall across most body systems from abdominal pain to tinnitus and depression to skin rashes.

Long Covid - symptoms

Symptoms such as fatigue, shortness of breath, brain fog and muscle aches frequently reported, less recognised symptoms such as anxiety, reduced motivation and neurological symptoms were also described.

Individuals may be prone to experiencing relapses; these may be triggered by physical or mental activity, stress, menstruation, heat, or alcohol. In some cases, relapses can occur with no specific trigger.

Some individuals have described feeling well after their initial infection, only to then experience a recurrence of symptoms, sometimes with new symptoms that they have

Supporting return to work for people with Long Covid

- TUC report - *Workers' Experiences of Long COVID*: 52% faced some form of discrimination/disadvantage; 19% had their employer question the impact of their symptoms; 13% faced questions from their employer about whether they had Long COVID at all. 18% respondents had triggered absence management or HR processes, and 5% had been forced out of their jobs.
- *Burton et al, 2003*: probability of return to work diminishes significantly with increasing time off work, and is one of the most powerful predictors of development of long-term incapacity and reliance on benefits (50% chance of returning to work after 6 months absence; 10-15% chance of return to work after 1 year absence; and less than 5% chance of return to work after 2 year absence).

Long Covid return to work – employers

- Support for adjustments - flexible working options needed
- Other factors to consider are:

What tasks does an employee undertake, does this need to be adapted?

Is specific equipment needed for a worker to undertake their role?

What hours will the employee work and how should breaks be allocated?

- Employers should consider what support can be provided by the individual's manager, since checking in regularly and adapting adjustments to changing circumstances is likely to be beneficial.

COVID-19 return to work guide: For managers

This leaflet offers guidance from Occupational Health (OH) Professionals on how managers can support workers to get back to work with ongoing symptoms following COVID-19 infection and Long COVID.

The guidance draws from the latest evidence and has been developed by experts working in OH, Human Resources, Psychology, Rehabilitation, and people with Long COVID.

Download the guidance [here](#).

Long Covid return to work - employees

- May benefit from colleague support such as having an allocated buddy in the workplace
- *NHS Your Covid Recovery* platform e.g. for goal setting.
- NHS – referral 3 months since Covid – and problems at work
- Patient groups: <https://www.longcovid.org/>

COVID-19 return to work guide: For recovering workers

This leaflet offers guidance for workers from Occupational Health Professionals on how to manage getting back to work after COVID-19 infection and Long COVID.

This leaflet is relevant to those who are in a job already, and those of you who are looking for work or starting a new job.

Download [here](#).

What individuals with LC need

- Clinical intervention and rehabilitation together
- Extended phased return to take account of the gradual and extended recovery time for many patients.
- Success of phased return depends on regular review and readjustment with line manager
- Individualised RTW and rehabilitation plans
- Funding scans or appointments to counteract healthcare delays may be a viable and helpful option for all parties

Ref Rayner, Campbell Long Covid Implications for the workplace Occupational Medicine. <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqab042> 03 April 2021

- Long Covid podcast
<https://www.som.org.uk/som-podcast>
- If OH not available - SOM website can be used as point of contact for referral:

Find an OH Provider

<https://www.som.org.uk/find-oh-provider-company>

Find an OH Professional

<https://www.som.org.uk/find-an-oh-professional>

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Supporting occupational health
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In conclusion..

- If an employer can work with an employee in identifying and accommodating adjustments, then this is likely to be beneficial to both the workplace and the individual.
- While there is a lot of uncertainty around Long Covid, common symptoms seem to resolve in most people over time, albeit slowly and over a period of several months. Returning to work can be an important aspect of an individual's rehabilitation.