

Leeds Long Covid Community Rehabilitation Service

Returning to an existing job

Information for patients



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Introduction

You have been referred to the COVID19 Rehab Pathway Team because you are having ongoing symptoms, over 12 weeks, from your COVID19 infection, you are in employment and these problems are affecting your ability to return to work.

You may need support to return to your job.

If you have been off sick for a week or longer, you will need to obtain a Fit note which says you are unfit to work. We recommend you get this from your GP.

As time goes on, you may begin to feel better and want to begin some preparation for returning to work.

The following booklet aims to explain how you can begin to do this.

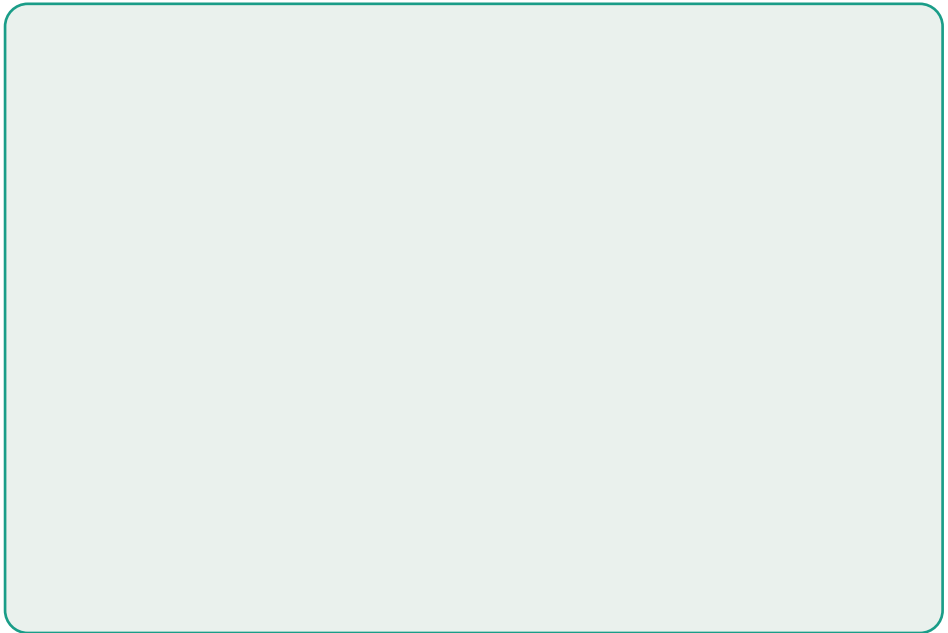
What is your work goal?

The first step is to identify your goal with regards to employment.

Examples of work related goals might include:

- I want to return to my original job and my full time hours within 3 months.
- I want to return to my original job but would like to reduce my hours for now.
- I want to return to my workplace but need to consider a different role as my original job is too demanding for me currently.

Write your goal here:



Keeping in touch with your employer

If your goal is return to your original job, it is a good idea to inform your employer of this at your earliest opportunity. This keeps your employer aware of your plans and allows them to identify any support you might need, to achieve this.

We suggest advising your employer of this in writing to provide a paper trail.

An 'example' letter to give to your employer might look like this:

Your address and postcode
Your telephone number
Date

Your employer's address:

Barclays Bank
1 Park Row
Leeds
LS1 6GH

Dear (your Manager's name),

As you will know I was diagnosed with Covid-19 on
This has left me with some ongoing symptoms and I have been referred to the Leeds Long Covid Community Rehabilitation Service.

I am writing to inform you that with your support I intend to return to my job in the future.

I am currently receiving rehabilitation to enable me to meet this goal.

I am happy to speak to you with regards to my plans when I am able.

Yours sincerely,

(Your name)

What does your job involve?

In order to consider if you are able to return to work, it is helpful to identify what this will entail in practice. Use this space to answer the following questions:

Job title:

How do you get to and from work?

Do you have a fitnote (sick note)? **Yes / No**

Date of expiry:

What does your job entail? What are your key roles and responsibilities?

Tip: your job description may help you answer.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

What are your hours and which days do you work?

.....

How many hours do you work per week?

.....

Do you do shift-work or a set pattern?

.....

Are you expected to do regular overtime? (paid or unpaid)

.....

Have you already tried to return to work?

This section of the workbook is for those who have already tried to return to work and it has been unsuccessful.

Attempting to return to work it not being successful can be a really challenging experiences. This in turn can then and additional stress and worry about returning to work.

If this has happened to you try to look for the positives, write down what went well, what didn't do well but most importantly what you have learnt from this for returning to work in the future.

What went well?

Think about anything that helped you when you went back to work, this could be an adjustment that was made or someone who was supportive.

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What didn't go well?

Think about what you found most challenging when you attempted to return to work.

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What have you learnt from previous attempts at work?

Using the information about think about how this can be used to support your next return to work to make this a successful return to work.

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Your health

How are you at the moment?

In preparing for a return to work, please consider your current difficulties and fill in the section below. Record any examples of problems that you are experiencing.

This will then help you (and your therapist) decide whether or not it is time to start exploring a 'return to work plan'.

Do you have problems with:

Physical (walking, use of your hands / arms, balance, dizziness, pain, sensation)

Thinking skills (concentration, memory, planning, organisation)

Emotions (feeling low, frustrated, irritable, easily angered or anxious? Do you find that you are more tearful or argumentative than you used to be?)

Fatigue (your energy levels, stamina, fitness, do you need to take breaks more often?)

Communication (do you struggle to talk to people or to follow conversations. Do you find it difficult being in groups of people? Is reading and writing more difficult?)

In light of your answers on the previous two pages, do you foresee any problems? Can you see any possible solutions to these potential problems?

Travelling to and from work (driving, using public transport, cycling)

Problem

Possible solution/s

The work environment (stairs, suitable toilets, hazards, noise and other distractions. Would you be expected to work from home?)

Problem

Possible solution/s

Team dynamics (support, relationships at work, culture of the organisation, how have other members of staff been supported to return to work?)

Problem

Possible solution/s

Look back at your job description on page 6. Are there any specific parts of your job that you think might be difficult or cause a problem?

Fill out the remaining tables with any issues you foresee:

Problem

Possible solution/s

Problem

Possible solution/s

Problem

Possible solution/s

Problem

Possible solution/s

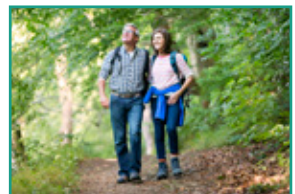
Starting to 'test out' your work skills

When considering a return to work it is helpful to obtain some 'feedback' on your current abilities. This is beneficial as you have likely been out of work for some time so may not be aware how tired or unfit you are.

Through doing some normal day to day activities at home, you can begin to obtain some helpful feedback on your current abilities.

Examples of activities to try (providing this is safe for you to do) are:

- Sorting through paper work, and letters.
- Placing books or CDs in alphabetical order.
- Using your computer for email, research or social media.
- Walking (how depends on your current abilities and symptoms).
- Helping with a mini DIY project (do not use ladders or sharp tools).
- Making phone calls, e.g. to the bank, a local shop, ordering a family takeaway.
- Cooking yourself a meal/snack (if it is safe to do so).



Many of these activities demand the same skills, abilities and elements that you will need to have for returning to work. For example using your home laptop for emails and social media enable you to build your typing skills and concentration.

Now consider:

- How are you managing with these tasks?
- What went well?
- What did you struggle with?
- Are there things you need to practice more?

Top Tip!

Use the log on the next page to collect your 'feedback'.

Through engaging in activities, you can consider how tired you felt, how difficult talking to others was, how easy concentrating on ordering books was, etc. Furthermore, if you did find any of these activities much more difficult than you had anticipated you can decide what you need to do to build up your skills more and plan this into your week.

After you have been testing out your work skills for some time, look back at your original goal on page 5. Does that goal still seem realistic? Do you need to tweak it or change it at all?

'Work practice' log

Date	Activity (e.g. building flat-pack furniture; making a budget spreadsheet; etc)	Feedback (e.g. How did you manage this task? What went well? What did you struggle with? Are there things you need to practice more?)

Creating a work preparation plan

When we are working, we are in a routine or shift pattern. It might be a bit of a 'shock to the system' when you return to work if you haven't got yourself into a good routine before you start. A good routine will make the transition back to work easier.

The early stages of building a work plan may include the following:

Establishing a helpful daily routine:

Establish helpful routines in terms of eating well, getting up and going to bed at a regular time.

Activity:

It is helpful to have a balance in terms of work, rest and play.

Work – e.g. Making phone calls, housework, opening post.

Rest – e.g. Relaxation, listening to music, sitting in the garden with a cup of tea!

Play – e.g. Socialising, crafts, painting, gardening, sports, puzzles, games.

In the early days you might need more rest; however, over time this will improve. You can grade your re-engagement in activities through the following:

- **Limiting the time:** e.g. work for 20 minutes instead of an hour.
- **Limiting the complexity:** e.g. simplify the task; make a checklist; ask someone to help you; use equipment or IT to make it easier.
- **Limiting the distance:** e.g. get a taxi one way and walk back.

- **Simplifying activities:** e.g. sitting down to make a sandwich.
- **Prioritisation:** e.g. choosing to go to your children's parents evening but not doing the ironing that day.
- **Delegation:** e.g. getting a cleaner so that you can focus on activities you consider more important.

Remember to start small as this is more likely lead to success than 'over doing it' in the early stages.

Eating well

Make sure you are eating a balanced diet. This will ensure you are looking after yourself and getting into good eating habits before returning to work.

Stay hydrated (drink plenty of water and non-caffeinated drinks).



For more information on eating well visit <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/>

Sleep

- Have a helpful sleep routine with a regular waking time and bed time.
- Have a bedtime wind-down routine, e.g. a bath, reading, relaxation.
- Turn off any electronic gadgets several hours before bed time; they can prevent you from getting to sleep.
- Try not to drink liquids too late before bed as this increases the need to get up to use the toilet.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine as this disrupts your sleep.

Managing your fatigue

If fatigue is an ongoing problem for you then please contact our service to request a copy of the **fatigue advice leaflet**. Attending the virtual group offered by Leeds Long Covid Community Rehabilitation Service will also offer lots of advice on fatigue management.



Planning your return to work

Most employers will allow you to complete a 'phased return to work'. By this, we mean that you initially return on reduced hours and duties. Then you gradually build these up.

This phased return has to be agreed by your employer.

Usually the framework they use is included in your employer's **absence management policy** – you will feel more informed on what to expect if you ask to view this policy now.

Some examples of options for a phased return are:

- Going back to work on temporarily reduced hours (e.g. half days or alternate days) for the first few weeks then gradually building this up.
(You may need an 'adjusted Fit-note' from your GP to cover you in doing this).
- Changing the hours you work, perhaps starting and finishing earlier or later to avoid travelling in rush hour.
- Changing some of your duties, or reducing some duties temporarily.
- Sharing some tasks with a colleague.
- Changing parts of your workspace so it is better suited to you. For example you might need a different keyboard, some new IT software, a set of headphones to take calls, a better chair or somewhere quiet to work.
(Your employer and Access To Work can help you with this. You can self-refer to the Access To Work scheme once you have a start date).
- Changing your routines to make work easier, or to fit with when you feel at your best or have more energy.

Due to the nature of Long Covid, a typical 4-week phased return is not the most suitable. When you are looking to start a phased return negotiating the most flexible phased return possible can be beneficial in ensuring a successful phased return.

The next few pages are advice that can be given to your employer to support your phased return.

Supporting staff to return to work with on-going COVID-19 related symptoms – Managers Guidance

Having recovered from the acute phase of the virus, some have returned to their normal lives reasonably quickly and easily, others continue to be affected by on-going symptoms such as extreme exhaustion, breathlessness and pain. In these cases- returning to work has been a challenge not only for our patients, but also for their employers.

Keeping in touch

As you will know during sickness absence- it is important to remain in regular contact with the staff member however; we have found that people are often very anxious about being away from work, and can feel guilty for having not returned sooner to support their colleagues during this difficult time. Please be aware that regular contact may be perceived as pressure to return and may contribute to the anxiety they are feeling. We have noticed that an increase in anxiety and low mood are often resulting in the exacerbation of other symptoms such as poor sleep quality and energy levels. Offering support might be enough to put their mind at ease and allow them to focus on their recovery.

Referring to Occupational Health early on, if it is available to you, can be a good support mechanism for both you and your staff member. They can help to avoid the staff member returning too early, and can support you with making return-to-work plans.

Speaking to your HR department to enquire about return-to-work policies might also make the return-to-work process more informed. Due to the nature of this recovery, some employers may consider offering extended full pay and may

not require staff to use annual leave in order to do a phased return. This allows managers to approach a phased return with the flexibility it needs- often enabling it to extend past a more typical 2-4 week period.

Ongoing symptoms

Firstly it is important to identify some of the more common on-going symptoms associated with COVID-19. Some people experience these symptoms having been very unwell; requiring extensive medical intervention. Others may not have been hospitalised but have developed what we now know as Long Covid. In this case, staff members are often very frustrated and feel less well informed about their symptoms.

More common symptoms include: breathlessness, pain, fatigue, difficulties focussing and switching between tasks, low mood, anxiety, coughing and poor sleep quality. Staff members can often be experiencing all of these symptoms to varying degrees, and in most cases, the symptoms have an impact on each other.

As you would expect, these symptoms are likely to affect the staff member's ability to carry-out many of their day to day tasks. More challenging tasks can require a recovery which can extend into hours and even days. People can often find themselves in a boom-bust cycle- where their energy levels fluctuate significantly from day to day.

We've found that the most debilitating symptom is often fatigue. The fatigue itself can cause or exacerbate almost all of the other symptoms. Fatigue is very different to tiredness- it is often described as an exhaustion of both the body and the mind, and isn't something that can, or should, be pushed through.

Safe timing of return to work

Choosing the right time for the staff member to return is incredibly important- and relies on communication. If Occupational Health are involved- they can support you and your employee in making this decision. There may be occupational therapists (like ourselves) or physiotherapists involved in your employee's care who can also support you in the decision making process.

Firstly- the staff member should have reasonably consistent activity levels from day to day, and have established a routine. Whilst they are still likely to be experiencing good and bad days, their bad days should be less severe, less frequent, and they should still be able to complete day to day tasks.

It is important that, whichever symptoms your staff member presents with, that they have some understanding of what can make them worse and what can make them better. This will allow you to put the most appropriate strategies in place when they return to work. Healthcare professionals working with them should be able to help them to understand this.

And finally- whilst their activity levels may be significantly lower than they were before they should feel well enough in themselves.

Phased returns

Phased returns have become increasingly common in workplaces as employers recognise the benefits it brings. They allow staff to:

- Re-build endurance to work-related tasks.
- Learn how to transfer symptoms management strategies to the workplace.
- Have sufficient time for recovery.
- Return to work sooner.
- Return to work more sustainably.
- And facilitate continued recovery.

It is worth mentioning, that you might need to take a more flexible approach than you may have done before. In our experience, staff members recovering from Covid benefit from starting off with very few hours and only increase very gradually. Return to work plans are most successful when managers can be adaptable and responsive to 'bad days', and where our patients have a degree of control over their workload. Understandably this cannot be facilitated in all workplaces, and in all roles. As a manager, you might need to consider whether you can temporarily allow for these adjustments.

A phased return can be made-up of many different components and some might work better than others. Planning the return before their first day can help to reassure the staff member, and it can also give you more time to put any agreed adjustments in place. During your return to work conversation- it is important to understand how their symptoms are likely to affect their ability to complete

work-related tasks. Identifying and understanding effective symptom management strategies outside of work, will allow you to apply the most appropriate adjustments to the workplace.

Planning hours and shifts:

- Starting off with a shorter working day allows the staff member to gradually increase their stamina to work-related tasks. Even if their role is not physically challenging- the cognitive and emotional demand of a working day is likely to be difficult.
- When the staff member first returns to work, it is normal for them to experience an extended recovery as they adapt and adjust. Working non-consecutive days will allow time for recovery, and is likely to maximise their efficiency during each shift.
- Poor sleep quality can significantly affect someone's level of energy and ability to complete work tasks. If the staff member is struggling with sleep, consider whether early shifts, and night shifts, should be avoided as they ease back in. A shift pattern which allows the staff member to keep a reasonably consistent routine might also help.

Work-related duties:

- Frequent breaks are likely to be beneficial in almost every case. Breaks allow for short periods of restoration- which can help the staff member to manage fatigue, pain and anxiety. It will mean that their overall recovery time after the shift is shorter, and they are likely to be more productive at work- especially towards the end of their working day. It is important to continue to allow breaks when the staff member returns to consecutive days.

- Breaks can be at fixed points during the day or you might encourage the staff member to use their own judgement. Some staff members might need a short break where they can sit and rest. Others might be able to continue to work-but need to do so in sitting. Some staff might need time to complete stretches or breathing exercises. The point of a break is to allow the staff member to feel more energized-and this is likely to mean different things to different people.
- If the staff member is struggling to manage more complex problem solving; background noise and small distractions might quickly drain their energy levels and make them much less productive. Finding a quiet space to work in, or allowing home working, is likely to help. This might be for all of their work- or just for the more demanding of tasks.
- When the staff member first returns to work, in the initial stages try to allocate work that will allow them to maintain an element of control, and where there is a degree of predictability. This will allow them to implement symptom management strategies and will ensure that they do not take on more than they are capable of.

Difficult tasks

There are likely to be certain tasks that are more challenging than others. These are likely to include:

- Moderate to heavy lifting and/or repetitive lifting.
- Elements of manual handling.
- Spending prolonged periods of time walking or standing.
- Moving at a very fast pace.
- Lots of talking – face to face or on the phone.

- Sustained periods of concentration or very frequent task switching.
- Being in very busy environments.

Consider how you could initially minimise, or remove, their exposure to these tasks. Doing so would improve their overall endurance to the shift, reduce recovery, and reduce the risk of additional sickness absence.

Progression

A gradual increase in the staff member's hours and duties could then be considered, but only when:

- The staff member is tolerating their current tasks and hours.
- Their recovery after each shift is reasonable.
- They have the physical, emotional and/or cognitive ability to complete any of the new suggested tasks.
- They feel generally well in themselves.

Due to the nature of this recovery, even with the best laid out plan, staff members are likely to have good and bad periods. It is important to try not to increase duties and hours too quickly; allowing for at least a couple of weeks before things are increased at each stage. This allows time for any delayed recovery, and it ensures that the duties and hours are sustainable. Keeping in regular contact as you normally would, and seeking guidance wherever necessary- should help to prevent any escalation of symptoms and keep your staff member feeling well and capable.

Guidance produced by: Occupational Therapists at Group Rehabilitation, University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS Foundation Trust.

This information can also be found in video format:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=bryRdjlzqRM&feature=youtu.be>

Additional support

The following organisations will be able to support you with your return to work:

Citizens' Advice Bureau

Online, phone-based or face to face advice on a range of topics including your rights at work (including pay, contracts, holiday and sick pay); agency workers' rights; flexible working; and parental rights.

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

Unions

If you are a union member get in touch with your union at your earliest opportunity.

They will be able to advise you in terms of your rights and negotiate with your employer with regards to your return to work. They can advocate on your behalf and challenge decisions.

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)

ACAS is an independent public body that provide free and impartial advice on employment rights; best practice and policies; and resolving workplace conflict. ACAS help to resolve workplace disputes between employers and employees.

<https://www.acas.org.uk/advice>

Equality Advisory Support Service

This helpline advises and assists individuals on issues relating to equality and human rights, including disability employment rights. They can also accept referrals from organisations which, due to capacity or funding issues, are unable to provide face to face advice to local users of their services.

<https://www.gov.uk/equality-advisory-support-service>

Occupational Health

If you work for a larger organisation your employer may have an in-house Occupational Health department. Smaller organisations might contract Occupational Health out to a specialist firm. Some companies do not have Occupational Health.

The role of Occupational Health is to advise your employer on the impact of your condition on your work and any reasonable adjustments or phased return which you might need. This is considered in the light of your employing organisation's policies.

Access to Work

If you have a job already, or if you are about to start a new job, you may be able to get help from Access to Work. You may be able to claim a financial grant, based on your needs, to cover:

- Special equipment, adaptations, or a support worker to help you do things like answer the phone and go to meetings.
- Help getting to and from work and any travelling as part of your job.

www.gov.uk/access-to-work

Welfare Rights Unit

Leeds City Council's Welfare Rights Unit can give you free, confidential, impartial advice and support on a whole range of issues: e.g. support to fill out benefits forms; guidance and support when making appeals; and checking your benefit entitlement and give guidance on using benefit systems.

welfare.rights@leeds.gov.uk or **0113 376 0452**

Other areas of advice:

- Yourcovidrecovery – www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk
- Scope – the disability equality charity: www.scope.org.uk

Summary

We hope this information booklet has helped you to think about your return to work goals, and has provided some helpful tips on what you can begin to do whilst recovering from Covid-19.

Contact:

Leeds Long Covid Community Rehabilitation Service

Email: licht.covid19rehabpathway@nhs.net

Phone: **0113 843 3496**

With thanks to the Community Neurological Rehabilitation Service at Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust and Occupational Therapists at Group Rehabilitation, University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS Foundation Trust for allowing us to adapt their booklet and information to support the recovery and successful return to work for those with Long Covid.