

FAQ on long covid/post Covid-19 condition

(This information may be used to inform workplace risk assessments, procedures or training. Research on long covid is continuously evolving and information is based on current data at time of publication. Employers should seek specific advice where required. For a copy of this checklist click on <https://www.healthandsafetyreview.ie/downloads> or email ronan@irn.ie .

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1	<p>What is long covid?</p> <p>Long covid, also known as post-Covid-19 condition, is affecting up to 1 in 10 people whereby they still have symptoms post infection for up to 12 weeks and even up to a year. The majority of people improve in time but people may experience differences in the rate of improvement. (WHO, 2021).</p>
2	<p>Who does it impact?</p> <p>Any person who has had actual or suspect Covid-19 is at risk of developing this condition. It affects people of any age. In some cases, it does not correlate with the severity of the acute infection (Rayner and Campbell, 2021) although other research indicates that those who were exposed to a high viral load during their initial infection are more at risk of developing it later e.g., those working with infected Covid-19 cases.</p>
3	<p>What are the symptoms?</p> <p>The most common symptoms reported include physical and cognitive fatigue, shortness of breath, headaches and chest pain. Less common symptoms include joint pain, dizziness and a cough.</p> <p>Other symptoms may involve serious organ disease including cardiovascular symptoms, neurocognitive (memory and speech), neurological (stroke and migraines) and respiratory issues (lung disease and asthma). For some individuals, symptoms may overlap with post-infectious chronic fatigue syndrome, also called myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME).</p>
4	<p>Which work sectors are most at risk?</p> <p>Healthcare workers, social care workers and those who are in contact with infected individuals or waste may be exposed to a greater viral dose than other workers and may be at greater risk.</p>
5	<p>How is it diagnosed?</p> <p>To date, there is no single test for diagnosing this condition. Obtaining a full history from the individual is important, including age, occupation, general medical history and Covid-19 infection history.</p> <p>Guidelines produced by NICE in England (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2020) advises the following criteria for diagnosing persistent symptoms of Covid-19:</p>

	<p>1) Ongoing symptomatic Covid-19: if people present with symptoms 4 to 12 weeks after the start of the acute Covid-19 that are not explained by an alternative diagnosis.</p> <p>2) Post Covid-19 syndrome/condition: if the person’s symptoms have not resolved 12 weeks after the start of acute Covid-19.</p>
6	<p>What should employees do if they suspect they have long covid?</p> <p>According to the HSE, people with symptoms should initially attend their general practitioner (GP) for a general assessment, followed by referral onto specialist pathways for people who require specialist services. Examples of assessments may include clinical tests focusing on lung function impairment, reduced muscle strength, nerve damage, autonomic dysregulation and organ damage.</p> <p>Employees are also encouraged to engage with their employer if they are diagnosed with the condition, to enable the employer to offer any supports and provide any work accommodations which may be needed. A consultation with an occupational health provider is also recommended, to ensure the best possible advice is given to the individual on the condition, the return-to-work options and any work adjustments needed to facilitate them in the work environment.</p> <p>According to the Society of Occupational Medicine, patients with specific conditions, including myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle), problems with the autonomic nervous system (heart, bladder, intestines etc) and lung issues, may require specialist cardiorespiratory clearance before returning to strenuous work.</p>
7	<p>What treatments are available?</p> <p>Treatment options vary depending on the symptoms being experienced. The model of treatment proposed by the HSE is based around supporting people to manage their own symptoms, and setting up a limited number of specialist pathways for those who require specialist services.</p> <p>For those with improved symptoms, research suggests treatments may include speech therapy, antihistamines, dietary alterations, heart rate and angina control. Physiotherapy may be useful for those with Postural Tachycardia Syndrome (PoTS), which is an abnormal increase in heart rate that occurs after sitting up or standing (Rayner & Campbell, 2021).</p>
8	<p>What are the implications for employers?</p> <p>Employers who have sickness absence policies may need to review these with regard to long covid. An international survey on behalf of the Society of Occupational Medicine found that over 20% of employees remained off work for up to 7 months after infection, and 45% were working at a reduced capacity. According to a report by The Economist recently, one in five people with long covid say they are unable to do even a part time, desk-based job.</p> <p>Employers should consider flexible working policies, the provision of home-working where possible, reduced hours and be patient with those with the condition. A longer than normal phased return to work may be needed than with other conditions, as workers may appear fine one day and not another day.</p>

9	<p>What are the work implications for employees returning to work after long covid?</p> <p>Long covid can have serious consequences on what an employee can and cannot do in the course of their job and each person's symptoms should be assessed individually. Research shows there may be issues with prolonged standing due to autonomic dysfunction. Ongoing fatigue can limit the length of time workers can stay at a task and also impact on work intensity. The use of certain meeting technologies e.g., Zoom and Teams technology can aggravate hoarseness due to over stimulation of the voicebox. Short-term memory, reading, naming objects, concentration and attention can all be impacted.</p>
10	<p>What are the implications for occupational health professionals?</p> <p>The role of occupational health is to advise on fitness to work and make recommendations on any adjustments that are needed to facilitate a person remaining in work or returning to the workplace after a period of illness or absence. Post Covid-19 condition should be treated the same as any medical condition impacting on work and employees returning to work may require support or advice, including the offer of any Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), such as counselling services. Consideration should be given to a phased return to the workplace or altered duties if necessary. This should be done in consultation with the employer, occupational health and the employee.</p>
11	<p>What are the implications for health and safety professionals?</p> <p>The health and safety professional, in conjunction with line management, should ensure that any person returning to work has had a fitness to work assessment completed by occupational health and the workplace risk assessment is updated.</p> <p>The risk assessment should reflect any changes/ modifications required to facilitate the employee at work and ensure no other employees are placed at additional risk due to those changes. Further information on the HSA's fitness to work guidance following Covid-19 absence is available at https://tinyurl.com/3yspde5v.</p>
12	<p>Further sources of information:</p> <p>EU-OSHA have published resources on long Covid, including a guide for managers on how to support someone with long covid return to work, and a guide for workers on the challenges and solutions for returning to work. Link attached: https://tinyurl.com/54dhsn99</p> <p>The Health Services Executive (HSE) website has a dedicated section on recovering after Covid-19: https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/recovering-after-coronavirus.html.</p> <p>The UK National Health Service (NHS) website at https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/long-term-effects-of-coronavirus-long-covid/.</p>
13	<p>References:</p> <p>Rayner, C & Campbell, R., 2021, Long Covid Implications for the workplace, <i>Occupational Medicine</i>, Link: https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqab042</p> <p>Sivan, S, Rayner C, Delaney, 2021, Fresh evidence of the scale and scope of long covid, <i>British Medical Journal</i>, 01st April 2021, link: https://www.bmj.com/content/373/bmj.n853.</p> <p>The Economist, 2021, Long Covid, and now for the aftershock, 01st May 2021.</p>

World Health Organisation, 2021, In the wake of the pandemic: preparing for Long COVID, link: https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/339629/Policy-brief-39-1997-8073-eng.pdf
