Returning to work after Long COVID Syndrome

Advice and Recommendations
for Employees, Employers and Organisations.

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Returning to work for people with Long COVID: advice and recommendations for employees, employers and organisations

*This publication is a collaboration between the Long Covid Cyprus network (OSAK) and the Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation (OEB).*

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Introduction – Objective

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly affected all parts of society and the economy, while workplaces and their operation have also seen significant changes due to containment measures that sought to have minimum impact on the workforce. However, while societies and health systems continue to be affected by the consequences of continuing COVID-19 infections, it is imperative to ensure a functioning and safe daily routine in the workplace.

This publication, which is based on current literature, aims to provide essential information on the condition known as "Post-COVID", "Post-COVID syndrome" or "Long COVID syndrome" and to serve as a guide for employers, and employees who may be suffering from this condition.

Information

A large percentage of people who get COVID-19 will have symptoms for weeks and months after. It is currently estimated that 5-10% will develop Long COVID (or Post COVID-19 condition), which is described by the World Health Organization as the existence of symptoms three months after the (confirmed or presumed) COVID-19 infection, with these symptoms lasting for at least 2 months with no other explanation. This definition has also been adopted by the Long Covid Cyprus network, namely, people with symptoms persisting three months after the confirmed (by a laboratory) COVID-19 infection with no other explanation.

Frequent symptoms include:

• fatigue;

• shortness of breath;

• cognitive disorders (e.g. memory loss, loss of concentration);

• autonomic nervous system disorders (such as heart palpitations, drop in blood pressure and hot flushes);

• diarrhoea;

• loss of appetite;

• loss of taste/smell;

• chronic pain;

as well as multiple other symptoms that have a significant impact on the ability of these individuals to function on a daily basis, resulting in restrictions and isolation.

Data from the Long Covid Cyprus network show that 57% of people with Long COVID have become alienated from their social circle due to their symptoms, while 17% say that they cannot cope with their household or personal care activities.

The symptoms may be a continuation of the symptoms caused by the COVID-19 infections, or they may appear after recovery. It is also difficult to predict how these symptoms will progress, as some come and go over time or re-appear following remission. The reasons for this are unclear, although it appears that physical stress or a new infection may trigger the reappearance of these symptoms.

It is also worth noting that the Post-COVID phase also triggers underlying diseases, for example in people who have diabetes, thryoidopathy, autoimmune diseases, musculoskeletal problems, chronic pulmonary disease and chronic heart disease.

Long COVID can affect people of any age. Studies show that it is less common in children and more common in elderly people, people with chronic health issues and people who had acute COVID-19. Global efforts by the scientific community, and a large volume of research funding, have helped shed a great deal of light on the patho-physiological mechanisms that cause this condition, and in recent months there have been more and more clinical trials to find potential treatment options.

Given that we still do not know how long the COVID-19 pandemic will last, cases continue and Long COVID is a recognised long-term condition, it is imperative to address the issues resulting from Long COVID across all parts of society and the economy.

The Long Covid Cyprus network

The Long Covid Cyprus network was set up in April 2022 by the Cypriot Federation of Patients' Association (OSAK) and comprises people with Long COVID and healthcare workers. The network is a member of the pan-European Long Covid Europe network and aims to achieve the following:

1. recognition by the State and the medical community of Long COVID syndrome in Cyprus as a multisystem medical condition;
2. recognition by the State and the medical community of the long-term effects of Long COVID in Cyprus on an individual, social, economic and professional level;
3. develop specialist medical facilities, rehabilitation facilities and medical procedures and protocols for the research, diagnosis, management and rehabilitation of patients with Long COVID in Cyprus;
4. set up research centres and provide financial and administrative support to research protocols, with a focus on Long COVID;
5. communication support from the State and the medical and scientific community in order to enhance the recognition of Long COVID in Cyprus and its consequences for the quality of life of patients with Long COVID;
6. recognise the medical and labour rights of people suffering from Long COVID in Cyprus;
7. support from the State providing professional and financial facilities, and to help with the gradual reintegration into employment for those suffering from Long COVID.

In this context, and in line with the objective of Long Covid networks internationally, this short handbook is a dynamic text aimed at describing the condition and providing advice and recommendations for the smooth and safe return to work of people with Post-COVID condition.

This handbook has been jointly created by healthcare professionals and Long COVID patients; it contains information from surveys conducted by the Long Covid Cyprus network and is based on international literature and similar handbooks.

Return to work for people with Long COVID

The safe and effective return to work is one of the biggest and most frequent concerns of people suffering prolonged symptoms after COVID-19. It is still mandatory, and a public health priority, for people with acute COVID to quarantine at home. After quarantine has been lifted, it is presumed that one will resume their daily activities, including professional ones.

The main reasons preventing the smooth return to work for people with Long COVID are:

• feeling easily fatigued or having episodes of fatigue, palpitations, low blood pressure, difficulty concentrating, memory loss;

• flare-up of symptoms after temporary improvement;

• psychological effects of long-lasting symptoms and the resulting restrictions in ability to function that these cause, such as heightened stress;

• social issues such as social stigma and exclusion due to the infection, and discrimination as a result of limited performance;

• practical and ergonomic issues in the workplace that may hinder adjustment;

• family issues due to the COVID-19 infection or prolonged symptoms;

• financial issues, especially for people with long-term illness.

Therefore, for a safe and smooth return to work, a multidimensional approach is essential. It is also vital to deal with issues that may extend to different areas such as health, the workplace, professional relationships and the need to provide accommodations.

Advice to employers and organisations when people with prolonged symptoms, post- COVID-19, return to work

Health:

Assess the extent to which the long-term symptoms affect performance at work.

Note down the activities that exacerbate symptoms.

Discuss and look for ways to minimise what might be exacerbating symptoms.

Encourage people who are experiencing symptoms at work to get medical advice.

A useful tool for assessing the performance of people with Long COVID is the Good Day/Bad Day Questionnaire (<https://batemanhornecenter>. org/wp-content/uploads/filebase/education/top\_resources/Good-Day-Bad-Day- Questionnaire-Fillable-V3-6\_6\_2022.pdf)

Planning:

Promote a gradual return to work, increasing working hours or duties progressively.

Adjust working hours to adapt to the needs of the employee, for example:

• allow them to take regular short breaks;

• allow for different starting/finishing times where possible.

Where possible, see if teleworking/working from home certain days of the week is possible.

Daily life:

Encourage establishing a daily routine during the working day.

Avoid regular meetings with many people.

Avoid relaying large volumes of information or complicated information.

Rather, give written instructions.

Avoid tension.

Ergonomics:

Look for ways to improve the working space to avoid making symptoms worse and help the efficiency of those with Long COVID.

Examples:

• reducing the distance travelled during the day;

• avoiding heavy, manual work;

• avoiding overcrowded working conditions;

• making ergonomic improvements to the workplace;

• parking accommodations.

Encourage individual protection measures in the workplace such as distancing, the use of masks, frequent laboratory testing, quarantining of people with symptoms etc.

Look for ways to improve the ventilation of closed spaces, including electrical work to ensure clean and renewable air.

Involvement of specialists:

Although Long COVID is a relatively new condition, and experience is gained over time, specific individuals and specialists have gained considerable clinical experience and knowledge. Specifically, doctors can help with understanding long COVID and provide advice (general practitioners, pathologists, respiratory physicians, cardiologists, neurologists, occupational doctors, physiotherapists, clinical psychologists etc.).

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*Cyprus, March 2023*

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