

UCU safety reps and equality reps briefing: 'long Covid'

What is 'long Covid'?

Long Covid is a multi-system disorder that affects every part of the body. Primarily a disease of blood vessels and not the lungs. There are huge numbers of people experiencing different symptoms, many of whom weren't tested or treated for Covid-19. It is not chronic fatigue syndrome and for many people the symptoms are severe.

Symptoms include:

- chest pain (angina) plus breathlessness on exertion
- palpitations, dizziness
- memory, understanding, concentration problems
- pins and needles, neurological pains in legs/arms
- hoarse voice, sore throat
- fatigue
- sleep disturbance.

What potential health problems can it cause? (list not exhaustive)

- Heart
- Autonomic nervous system e.g. heart rate and blood pressure
- Allergies and hypersensitivity
- Low oxygen saturations on exertion
- Physical brain effects (neurocognitive e.g. memory, attention, concentration)
- Extreme deconditioning more than expected with viral infection
- Extreme distress and sense of trauma (experience of not being believed)
- Nerve damage (hands, feet, face, pain, numbness)
- Headaches, muscle pain
- Pulmonary emboli (clots on lungs)
- Inflammation throughout the gut
- Diabetes/thyroid disease
- Fevers
- Secondary infections

Important:

1. Most people will not have had a positive test confirmed by a medical professional or have been treated in hospital because of the way that Covid-19 was managed during the demands for hospitalisation and medical intervention. Millions of people in the UK contracted the virus. Unless their symptoms were considered serious, they were left to manage their illness at home, sometimes alone. Many of these people were faced with debilitating, frightening symptoms.
2. The **Zoe Covid Symptom Study** has produced figures suggesting that 10% of people who contracted Covid-19 are still unwell after three weeks, and that 5% may continue to be sick for months.
3. Nearly one in five people who have had Covid-19 are diagnosed with a mental health condition such as anxiety, depression or insomnia within three months of testing positive for the virus, according to a study that suggests action is needed to mitigate the mental health toll of the pandemic. The analysis – conducted by researchers from the University of Oxford and NIHR Oxford Health Biomedical Research Centre
4. Although most people have not had the symptoms of long Covid for 12 months, they could still be covered by the legal definition of disability under the Equality Act.

What can branches do to support members?

1. Ensure members access support from their GP in the first instance if they feel they may have long Covid.
2. Support members in the disclosure of 'long Covid' to their employer and offer advice and support in development of individual risk assessments and/ or reasonable adjustments.
3. Ensure employers consult with safety reps and equality reps and put in place both short and long-term measures to support all those who may be affected by long Covid.

Examples:

- employers can provide practical support for individuals who are undergoing treatment or rehabilitation
- employers can arrange for an occupational health assessment
- employers can support individuals to access tests and treatment e.g. physiotherapy
- employers can put in place support mechanisms to enable individuals to undertake specific treatments for symptoms
- employers take anticipatory measures to ensure staff experiencing increased sickness absence due to long Covid are not treated unfairly and are able to take disability leave to rehabilitate, undertake treatment and attend medical appointments.

4. ensure the risks associated with long Covid are specifically identified within organisation wide risk assessments
5. review sickness absence procedures to ensure no unfair treatment for those staff who are experiencing ongoing health issues due to long Covid
6. ensure employers understand that many staff experiencing long Covid could be considered disabled under the Equality Act and it is important for them to put in place reasonable adjustments as soon as possible where the symptoms are substantial and ongoing. In cases where implementing reasonable adjustments may result in a delay, employers should place individuals on disability leave
7. ensure management are trained in understanding the effects of Covid-19 and ongoing and recurrent symptoms that it causes.

Additional resources:

- <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/1940/Equality-advice-and-guidance>
- https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10225/Reasonable-adjustment-passport/pdf/ucu_adjustment_passport_apr19.pdf
- https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6091/Reasonable-adjustments---removing-barriers-to-disabled-people-at-work-UCU-guidance/pdf/Reasonable_adjustments.pdf
- <http://www.hazardscampaign.org.uk/blog/hazards-campaign-thursday-talk-the-challenges-of-long-Covid-2>
- https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7835/Disability-leave-2016/pdf/Disability_Leave_2016.pdf

Support groups:

- <https://www.longcovid.org/>
- **Body Politic** - an international support group for sufferers of long Covid hosted on the Slack platform
- **COVID 19 Recovery Awareness** - a US based site including details of international peer support groups and research projects
- **Covid 19 Recovery** - a UK based site including patient stories and a resource library
- **LongCovidSOS** - set up by the UK arm of the Body Politic group, and including a powerful film