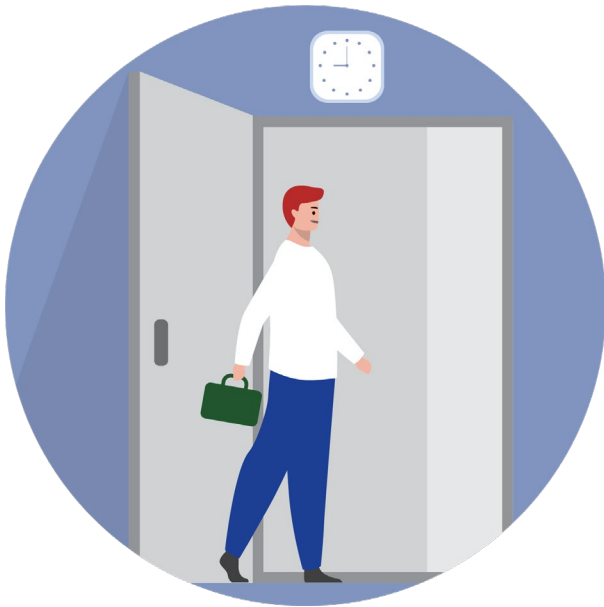


Return to Work

Category: 3. Road to Recovery

Changing Relationship with Work or School

Some people may find that they need to change their relationship to work or school as they manage the symptoms of Long COVID and find the services and support they need for their recovery. This might mean taking time away from work/school or exploring possible accommodations to make one's job or studies more manageable.



Signs you may need to make some changes

If you are currently working or in school, here are some signs that you may need to make changes:

- You are pushing through symptoms to complete the work or school day and needing entire evenings and/or weekends to recover.
- You are frequently missing deadlines or making errors you do not normally make. At work, your productivity is declining. At school, your grades are going down.

- You are needing to take frequent sick days from work, or you are missing classes due to symptom flare-ups.

If you cannot work right now but you need to re-enter the workforce, here are some signs you may need additional support:

- You are not able to manage basic daily needs (such as preparing meals or showering).
- You experience a consistently high level of symptoms, or you find that your symptoms get worse over time.

According to the World Health Organization, it is best for people with Long COVID to be able to self-manage their energy at home before they start (or return) to work. Returning too early can make symptoms worse or come back, resulting in more difficulties at work.

If you notice the signs that you may need to make some changes or find additional support, the first step is to discuss this with your primary care provider or visit a walk-in clinic. They may be able to provide you with further direction and any medical documentation you will need.

Find out what supports are available

If you are currently working or in school but you are struggling:

- At work, you can learn about what supports are available by asking a trusted employer or human resources (HR) department, your private insurance, union, or income assistance programs.
- If you are a student, you can access additional support through your educational institution, such as the student disability support centre (or its equivalent), an academic advisor, or a trusted instructor.
- Social workers may also be able to provide support around insurance or disability documentation, finding financial supports, connecting to low or no cost counselling, and other services and programs that may be available.
- **Please note that you are not required to disclose any personal information at this time.** At this stage, you do not have to let your employer or school know about your health condition. You can inquire about support options in a more general manner.

If you need to work but cannot and need income:

- You may consider applying for disability benefits and claims.
- See also ['When you no longer have a job but need income'](#) section later in this topic.

Reflecting on What is in Your Best Interest

Sometimes it is difficult to acknowledge you may need a change, even when you are struggling. There are many reasons why a person might ignore their ongoing symptoms and return too quickly to work/school, continue to work/go to school, or return too quickly and continue to work/go to school and continue to work or go to school when they are struggling. It is important to think about if continuing to work or study as you have before is in your best interest at this time or if making some changes would benefit your health.

Here are some common pressures people experience to remain at work/school and different options that are available, depending on your reason(s), resources, and circumstances.

1. **Financial Security:** You may feel financial pressure to continue working or return to work to maintain your income, or you may need to complete your school requirements to complete your certification or degree. If this is the case for you, some questions to explore are:
 - a. Are there income assistance programs available to you? Such as a provincial disability support program or Canada pension plan disability benefit? (Please see your Resources page for information on disability benefits.)
 - b. Are there ways you can adapt your budget, living expenses, or informal financial support available to you (such as from family, friends, or spouse/partner)?
2. **Mental Health Consequences/Internal Pressure:** You may be motivated to return to work or school because it is a source for meaning and purpose in your life, as well as a way to stay connected with your community. If this is the case for you, some questions to explore are:
 - a. Are there ways you can still engage in your community outside of work/school?
 - b. Are there mental health services you can access to support grieving the loss or change of school/work?
3. **External pressure:** You may feel pressure from others, including friends, family, employers, insurance companies, or fear of being labelled as 'lazy.' If this is the case for you, some options to explore are:
 - a. Connecting with a doctor to gain the appropriate medical documentation for insurance or disability benefits or workplace accommodation.
 - b. Connecting with peer support groups to receive validation and learn from others who have similar experiences.
 - c. Connecting with disability support agencies in your area (please see your Resources page).

After reflecting on your reasons to remain at work or school, and after weighing your options, you may be ready to make changes to your relationship with work or school. You can take your medical documentation to your employer, HR department, Student Disability Centre (or equivalent), or academic advisor and start a discussion around the changes recommended by the primary care provider.

Accommodations

Some people may need time away from work or school due to Long COVID, but others may be able to safely remain at work or school (as in, without getting worse and allowing for improvement of health) by making certain adjustments to the work/school environment or the terms of the employment/education. This is also called accommodations.

Accommodations are a formalized agreement between you and your workplace or school to help you succeed at your job based on your unique needs. Simply put, accommodations can help make staying at work/school more doable and sustainable. Accommodations are targeted at reducing the cognitive, physical, and social/emotional demands of your workload. Workplace accommodations may also be something to explore if you are planning a return to work following a medical leave of absence.

Please note that if you are requesting an accommodation you must disclose your disability. Disability Alliance BC's definition of disclosure is below.

'Disclosure refers to telling an employer about your disability or chronic health condition. The most important factor in deciding whether or not to disclose to an employer is your ability to do the job. If your disability will not affect your ability to do the job, you are not required to disclose. If you will require accommodation to do the job, you must disclose.'

Employers and educational institutions (like universities and colleges) have a **duty to accommodate** under Canadian Human Rights Act (federal law) – meaning they have a duty to remove and address barriers related to the needs of employees/students (see also [this webpage](#) from Public Service Alliance of Canada for more about duty to accommodate). This duty, however, is up to the point of **undue hardship** – this describes a situation where the cost for the employer to accommodate an employee is more than what the employer is reasonably expected to bear. What 'undue hardship' looks like depends on various factors, such as size of the employer, their financial capacity, potential risks to others, etc.

There is some research on people with other illnesses (such as cancer) showing that making adjustments in the workplace combined with managing symptoms can help with return to work and school (see [CAN-PCC recommendation](#) for more details). There is no research yet specifically with workplace supports for people with Long COVID.

Here are some common accommodations to explore:

- **Remote work:** Are you able to work or review lectures from home?
- **Flexible hours:** Can you adjust work hours depending on what times in the day you feel the most energy or to match your sleep schedule?
- **Breaks:** Can you take additional breaks outside of your typical or scheduled breaks? Can you have a dedicated space to take breaks and/or a place to lay down?

- **Longer time to complete tasks:** Can you be allowed more flexible deadlines and more time to complete tasks at work or school?
- **Modified job duties:** Are you able to have someone else take over tasks that are more challenging for you at this time? For example, taking meeting minutes? Lifting and carrying items?
- **Job sharing:** Can you share your responsibilities on a part-time or reduced-time basis with someone else also on a part-time schedule?
- **Modified environment or adaptive equipment:** Can you work or take tests in a quiet room with fewer distractions, perhaps with noise-cancelling headphones? Can you request a different set up at work (such as adding a chair or requesting a chair or desk that allows you to recline)? Can the lighting be adjusted? Can you limit your screen time, or use a screen dimmer app or blue light glasses? Can you use speech-to-text or text-to-speech software?

Returning to work or school

Readiness to return to work or school is going to look different for everyone. If you are still experiencing symptom flare-ups and set-backs (or the push/crash cycle), and especially if you cannot manage your basic daily tasks, it is not recommended to increase your activities or start returning to work or school.

It may be helpful to think about how many hours of work or upright activity would be required for an initial return to work or school. Also consider your current tolerance for similar activities without crashing or making symptoms worse – ideally, your tolerance would allow room for improvement of your symptoms.

'In post COVID-19 condition, it has been consistently observed that too-early return to activities leads to symptom exacerbation or relapse, loss of confidence, and work loss. People with post COVID-19 condition need to be able to self-manage their energy at home before they start to work' (World Health Organization, [Clinical Management of COVID-19](#), August 2023, page 126).

If you resonate with this experience, it is important to respect your current abilities. This does not mean you are giving up hope of a return but rather focusing on what you can do now and prioritizing your health and wellbeing.

General Recommendations for Planning Return to Work or School

- **Long COVID needs a unique return to work/school process:** Long COVID symptoms vary and fluctuate in duration and severity over time. For this reason, a prolonged, phased, and flexible return to work/school plan with regular check-ins is recommended. The traditional 6-to-8-week gradual return to work with pre-planned increases in workload is usually not effective for people with Long COVID. In fact, this approach can worsen the illness and lead to more time needed off of work. Instead, it is

recommended to gradually increase or decrease workload over time based on symptoms to find the best level for you (this is also called a symptom titrated approach).

- **Ask for help:** You should not have to create a return to work plan on your own. A Long COVID informed doctor, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, or vocational specialist can help.
- **Appropriate assessment is vital:** It is important to receive appropriate assessment to determine your readiness for returning to work/school. Traditional assessments, such as Functional Capacity Evaluations, may **not** be appropriate and even harmful. This is because these tools do not take into account that a person with Long COVID may be able to perform a task during an evaluation, but then be bed bound for days (this is also referred to as the delayed effects of activity). It is important for the assessment to be individualized to your safe activity tolerance (as in, without getting worse and allowing for improvement of health). The assessment should consider the impact of Long COVID on your quality of life and overall function. It should also consider your roles and responsibilities outside of work and how they may be impacted, and the specific job you are returning to.
- Traditional 'work hardening' programs used to help people recover and return to work from other illnesses or injuries are not appropriate for someone experiencing post-exertional malaise: These are usually based on a graded exercise approach, which can be harmful.

'Interventions for rehabilitation based on fixed incremental increases in the time spent being physically active or graded exercise, should not be offered to people experiencing post-exertional symptom exacerbation (PESE)' (World Health Organization, [Clinical Management of COVID-19](#), August 2023, page 115).

Instead, people who experience post-exertional malaise benefit from a flexible symptom titrated approach to returning to activities, work, and school. This may involve working with your healthcare provider to find a safe starting point (often with a small number of hours and modified duties). You may trial this for a set period of time and then reassess at the end of the period (or before if a symptom flare-up occurs). You would then decide with your provider to either increase, decrease, or stay at the same level, based on symptoms.

- **You will need time to develop pacing strategies at work or school that are specific to your setting:** There is only so much you can do to prepare before you return to work or school. Sometimes it will take getting back into the environment to understand how you can pace in these settings. Offer yourself some kindness over this learning period and keep regular communication with your supporters (your care providers and your support network).
- **Enter the process with an open mind, anticipating a range of possible outcomes:** You may return to the same employment or school at a full or reduced level. Or, you may find alternative meaningful employment or you may not be able to return to any form of employment for some period of time.

'...there is a potential harm from not applying the suggested interventions for return to everyday activities and work in post COVID-19 condition, as a limited ability to engage in one's desired activities can negatively impact mental health, causing a cyclical and cascade effect of further negative outcomes' (World Health Organization, 'Return to Everyday Activities at Work' in [Clinical Management of COVID-19](#), August 2023, page 125-126).

When you no longer have a job but need income

It can be very difficult to find employment with a chronic illness like Long COVID. Your symptoms may make it difficult for you to hold a traditional 9-to-5 job that requires you to sit or be on your feet or look at a computer screen for a long time. Perhaps you have a job already but need a new position that will allow you to work differently.

These are big changes, and it can be difficult to find and assess your readiness for a new job and perhaps even a new type of job.

It can be helpful to reflect on what type of job may match your current strengths, what accommodations may support you at work (see the previous page for more about accommodations), and for what type of job the accommodations would be feasible.

Please see the 'Finances and Return-to-Work' section of your provincial/territory Resources. There are disability advocacy organizations and employment services available that help match people with disabilities and chronic illnesses (such as Long COVID) with employers who are willing to accommodate.

Remember, disclosing your condition during the job application, interview, and contract negotiation process is a personal decision. The [Disability Alliance BC Disclosure Guide](#) is a helpful resource for anyone in Canada.

Further resources

Your union or human resources department may be able to help.

There may be disability services and resources available in your area. Call **8-1-1** to find out what is available close to you.

If your extended health benefits or employer cover private occupational therapy (OT), an occupational therapist with experience in Long COVID, concussion, or Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS) would be suited for assessing and providing recommendations for Long COVID, especially for post-exertional malaise, fatigue, and brain fog. Funding can sometimes be accessed through extended health benefits, your union or human resources, and your employer.

Where to next

- Read [the recommendation](#) by CAN-PCC on the positive impact on using workplace programs and support to improve work participation for individuals with lived experiences.
- Read the document by the World Health Organization called '[Clinical management of COVID-19](#)'.
- Check out [this page from Public Service Alliance of Canada \(PSAC\)](#) on duty to accommodate.
- Take a look at the document by Disability Alliance BC called '[Disclosing Your Disability - a Legal Guide for People with Disabilities in BC.](#)' The content is relevant for anyone in Canada.
- Call 8-1-1 to find out what kind of resources and services are available in your area.
- Visit [healthexperiences.ca](#) to learn about how people with Long COVID had their [work and careers impacted](#) by their condition, and how they [received support from employers and colleagues](#).