

What Long COVID-19 Means for Return-to-Work Plans

Most of the United States is now open for in-person business, and mask mandates have mostly gone away. This can make it seem like the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a concern, but that may be wishful thinking. In fact, business leaders caution that COVID-19's lingering effects may continue to disrupt workplaces now and into the future.

Specifically, employers are becoming increasingly concerned about "long COVID-19," a term used to describe ongoing effects or conditions developed after a COVID-19 infection.

This article explains how long COVID-19 may impact employers as they return to in-person operations.

Long COVID-19, Explained

Long COVID-19 refers to ongoing symptoms that can last weeks or months after the initial COVID-19 infection. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), long COVID-19 can occur in anyone who has contracted COVID-19, even if the illness was mild or there were no initial symptoms. This little-understood phenomenon concerns health experts, as these types of ongoing symptoms caused by other illnesses are usually only present among individuals who have had severe infections.

The following are some common long COVID-19 symptoms, according to the CDC:

- Breathing difficulty or shortness of breath
- Tiredness or fatigue
- Symptoms that get worse after physical or mental activities (also known as post-exertional malaise)
- Thinking difficulties or concentration issues (sometimes referred to as "brain fog")
- Cough
- Chest or stomach pain
- Headache
- Fast-beating or pounding heart (also known as heart palpitations)
- Joint or muscle pain
- Pins-and-needles feeling
- Diarrhea
- Sleep problems
- Fever
- Dizziness on standing (lightheadedness)
- Rash
- Mood changes
- Change in smell or taste
- Changes in menstrual period cycles

As the above list illustrates, long COVID-19 symptoms overlap considerably with common health issues. This can make it difficult to identify in the first place. Therefore, employees with long COVID-19 may not be initially aware of their infection and might attribute symptoms to more mundane conditions, such as a cold.

How Long COVID-19 May Disrupt Workplaces

Currently, health experts are still trying to understand why some people develop long COVID-19 and others don't. They are also studying the condition's prevalence to see how widespread it is.

According to research from the University of Washington, among a group of 234 individuals who were observed for up to nine months after COVID-19 infection, approximately 30% had persistent symptoms, with fatigue being the most common. Separately, research from Stanford University found that approximately 73% of COVID-19 patients said they still had at least one symptom 60 days or longer after the initial diagnosis.

Summarily, this research illuminates the difficult position employers are in right now: A significant number of their workers may continue to deal with COVID-19 and its symptoms well into the future. This means potentially drawn-out operational interruptions for employers.

Beyond contributing to operational disruptions, employees with long COVID-19 may require accommodations in the workplace. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, [long COVID-19 can be considered a disability](#) under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); however, long COVID-19 might not qualify as a disability in every instance. Thus, employers may have an obligation under the ADA to provide applicable employees with reasonable workplace accommodations if they meet certain qualifications. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, "An individualized assessment is necessary to determine whether a person's long COVID-19 condition or any of its symptoms substantially limits a major life activity."

Employer Actions

With the potential for ongoing long COVID-19 impacts, employers should consider taking action to safeguard their workplaces. The following steps can help employers dealing with long COVID-19 workplace issues:

- **Educate staff on long COVID-19 symptoms.** The entire workplace should be introduced to the idea of long COVID-19, including its potential symptoms, so everyone knows what to look out for.
- **Foster open communication.** Employees should talk to their managers if they're experiencing any prolonged health issues that may impact their performance, even if the employees are unsure whether the symptoms stem from COVID-19 or not.
- **Have remote work backup plans.** Employers can consider having employees work from home when they're dealing with long COVID-19, as the symptoms may not be debilitating in all cases.
- **Be adaptable and accommodating.** Employers should work with individuals experiencing long COVID-19 to find a way to effectively manage their symptoms while still accomplishing job duties. For instance, if an employee cannot focus on tasks due to brain fog, perhaps they could be retrained for a different role. Other potential accommodations include job restructuring, modified scheduling or role reassignment.
- **Train managers to recognize long COVID-19 ADA requests.** ADA reasonable accommodation requests do not need to be submitted in writing (can be verbal) or even include the phrase "reasonable accommodation." As such, managers should be trained to recognize when an employee with long COVID-19 symptoms may be making such a request and should initiate a dialogue to begin the process.

These steps are only some ways employers can prepare for long COVID-19 interruptions. In general, employers will need to stay agile and work with individual employees to determine the best course forward in each situation.

Conclusion

Dealing with long COVID-19 symptoms has the potential to disrupt workplaces for the foreseeable future, even though the level of disruption is difficult to predict, as health experts are still studying the effects of long COVID-19. However, ignoring long COVID-19's potential impact could leave workplaces open to operational disruption and legal issues. As more organizations return to work in person, having a general plan for how to handle employees with prolonged COVID-19 symptoms will be invaluable.

Contact local legal counsel for help adjusting or creating workplace policies relevant to long COVID-19.

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