

UK work policies not fit for people living with long COVID, says study

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New research has found current sickness absence and return to work policies in the workplace are unfit for purpose for those living with long COVID.

In one of the first qualitative studies to investigate attempts to return to employment by people with long COVID, researchers from the University of Stirling and the Universities of Oxford and York spoke to 65 adults in 2021 and 2022 who were dealing with continuing disability as a result of the condition.

They found that existing workplace policies that classify employees simply as either 'able' or 'disabled' are not helpful for people with illnesses like long COVID-19, which are unpredictable, often involve invisible symptoms, and vary in their severity.

Dr. Alice MacLean of the University of Stirling's Institute of Social Marketing and Health (ISMH) said, "Long COVID is not yet officially classified as a disability in the UK, and there is very little advice for people with long COVID on how best to return to work."

"Study participants told us that existing sickness absence, return to work, and welfare policies do not meet the needs of workers with long COVID and that they often experienced a lack of support on attempting to return to work."

"As well as trying to manage the demands of work alongside their ongoing symptoms, they also had the additional tasks of educating employers and colleagues about the debilitating effects of their symptoms and negotiating workplace adaptations, such as a change in role, working hours, or workplace location."

"Many talked about feelings of sadness, guilt, or fear about being unable to work as well as they had done before and said that people at work often did not recognize the severity of their symptoms nor realize how much symptoms prevented them from being able to work in the same ways as they had previously."

People with long COVID have experienced marked changes in their ability to participate in paid employment. Economic inactivity has risen significantly among people with self-reported long COVID in the UK compared to those without long COVID.

More than 50 countries, including most recently Belgium, have classified COVID-19 as an occupational disease, providing workers who have long-term disability associated with COVID-19 infection with long-term disability and additional financial protection and compensation.

Participants also told researchers about experiencing relapses when attempting to return to work before they were well enough to or not returning to work gradually enough.

One said, "It took me a really long time before I accepted that I wasn't well enough to work. I probably drove my managers mad because I would email every couple of weeks and say, 'Right, I think I'm better, I'll be back on Monday', and then lo and behold, I would be ill again."

The research is published in [*Disability & Society*](#).

More information: Eilidh Anderson et al, Episodic disability and adjustments for work: the 'rehabilitative work' of returning to employment with Long Covid, *Disability & Society* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2024.2331722](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2331722)

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