

# People with long COVID three times more likely to leave employment, UK study finds

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A study of more than 9,000 people who were in work before the pandemic has found that people with long COVID are at three times higher risk of leaving employment compared to those without COVID

symptoms.

COVID infections have once again been on the rise, and while many people will recover fairly quickly, for others complications can start after the initial infection and symptoms last for more than 5–12 weeks.

Now, a new study from Keele University and the University of Birmingham, [published](#) in *PLOS One*, has found that those with long COVID symptoms lasting for more than 28 weeks, which is beyond the maximum period of statutory [employment](#) protection in the U.K., are more likely to leave employment than those without symptoms.

The researchers looked at two groups of people with long COVID; people who experienced symptoms lasting between 5 and 28 weeks, and then those who had symptoms for 29 weeks or more. These groups were compared with those who had COVID symptoms for less than five weeks or no symptoms at all. The study looked at the likelihood of employment exit; working zero hours (sickness absence); reduction in working hours; and reduction in mental well-being in the workplace.

Professor Paul Sissons, Professor of Regional Economic Development and Policy at Keele University Business School, said, "The research demonstrates the significant impact which long COVID has had on individuals' employment outcomes, particularly for those who leave work.

"The research highlights important gaps in the sickness benefits system, but also points to the importance of the role of employers in supporting the management of long-term conditions in the workplace.

"Our analysis suggests that long COVID poses a twin challenge to employers of providing adaptations and flexibility to help employees manage the physical symptoms, as well as better supporting mental

health and well-being."

Dr. Darja Reuschke, Associate Professor at the City-Region Economic Development Institute, University of Birmingham, who led the study said, "Long COVID is still a fairly new illness for society to deal with, and one that does not seem to be going away any time soon.

"By the end of March 2024, there were an estimated 2 million people in England and Scotland experiencing long COVID symptoms. This undoubtedly will have an impact on the working population, particularly for those whose symptoms continue past statutory sick pay."

The research found that those at the highest risk of leaving work were long COVID sufferers with symptoms lasting for more than 28 weeks. The risk of taking sickness absence was most likely in the group with symptoms for 5–28 weeks and was similar to those who had short COVID.

The study also discovered that having long COVID is not associated with reduced working hours, and if still in work, those with long COVID 29+ do not work less (or more) than they did before the pandemic.

Donald Houston, Professor of Regional Economic Development, who worked on the study said, "Our study shows that those with long COVID who can work, want and do continue to work. Working zero hours is associated with people who fall within the statutory sick pay/leave limits, and then after that people go back to work if they can, or leave work either through resignation or redundancy."

Poor mental health was also a big factor for those with long COVID compared to those with no symptoms, and even more so for those with symptoms for 29+ weeks. The study found that people with long COVID 29+ weeks are likely to adapt to live and work with their symptoms.

For those with long COVID for 5–28 weeks, the negative impact on mental health is mediated by earnings which hints at possible job characteristics associated with higher/lower income that facilitate workplace adaptations (or not).

Dr. Reuschke added, "COVID-related health impacts on our society and workforce have not gone away. The pandemic is over but the longer-lasting health effects continue to pose risks to public health, the economy, and individuals' employment and earnings.

"Extending statutory sick pay beyond 28 weeks and giving people greater flexibility to manage phased returns to work, would help to reduce the risk of long COVID sufferers leaving employment.

"Financial support for employers to maintain employment until recovery from long COVID would help to preserve employment and tackle the rising level of inactivity in the UK, something the new Labor government has said it is keen to realize."

**More information:** Darja Reuschke et al, Impacts of Long COVID on workers: A longitudinal study of employment exit, work hours and mental health in the UK, *PLOS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0306122](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0306122)

Provided by Keele University

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