

Long-COVID & Returning to Work



Many Patients with Long-COVID Report Difficulty Returning to Work



Many common long-COVID symptoms can negatively impact an individual's ability to return to work following infection and be productive while engaged in work. Such symptoms include brain fog, dizziness, inability to focus, fatigue, anxiety and depression, and inability to exercise or be active.¹ As a result of these symptoms, it is not surprising that many patients with long-COVID report challenges in returning to work. In a survey of over 3,700 long-COVID patients, 22% reported not being able to work at the time of the survey (i.e., six months following acute infection) due to their long-COVID complications.² Another study from the U.K.'s National Institute for Health Research found that out of 4,000 U.S. workers, 50% reported being unable to work full-time six months after acute infection.³ Since as many as 100 million Americans have been infected with the virus causing COVID-19, the potential impact to millions of American workers and their industries could be of major national importance.⁴

Certainly, the experience of individual patients with long-COVID varies greatly by the acuity and duration of their symptoms. Additionally, workers with long-COVID in different industries will experience diverse challenges in their return to work, as the physical and cognitive demands of their jobs vary significantly. However, for many patients with long-COVID, their ability to work at full capacity may be limited to some degree. For non-salaried (hourly) workers, the disruption in their ability to work full-time can bring economic and financial stresses, which can add to the mental and physical challenges they are already experiencing as a result of their long-COVID symptoms.

Although patients with long-COVID may experience substantially disabling symptoms, many patients struggle to find resources to meet their needs, since there is still little known about the specific causes and treatment of long-COVID. Moreover, long-COVID can occur even after mildly symptomatic, and perhaps asymptomatic, infections given that many long-COVID patients never received a positive COVID test. For example, in order to qualify for long-term disability under Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income, long-COVID claimants must be able to prove they have a disabling condition that prevents them from performing their job and lasts for more than twelve consecutive months.⁵ Many long-COVID patients may have substantially limited functioning for months, but at a level that does not meet the threshold of full disability or full disability for a specified period. Scientists and the medical community are still learning how much time full recovery from long-COVID takes.⁶ Understanding the severity and duration of long-COVID for specific patients is an important factor for policymakers, employers, and others in the health care community as they assess to what degree current disability insurance coverage sources may be adequate to meet identified needs.

Workers' Compensation for Long-COVID



Since March 2020, workers' compensation claims have significantly increased. While data on workers' compensation nation-wide is lacking because there is no single source for this information in the U.S., data from the California Workers' Compensation Institute (CWCI) gives insight into the trends of workers' compensation claims due to COVID-19 thus far. Their data shows over 140,000 COVID-19 claims in California, with 32% from health care workers and 17% from the public sector.⁷ While health care professionals and first responders who contract COVID-19 are likely to be covered by workers' compensation, many other employees are not. There have been numerous reports of employees being rejected, because insurers state there is a lack of proof that the workers were infected on the job.⁸

What Is Being Done to Help Long-COVID Patients During Their Return to Work?

Many individuals with long-COVID are requesting accommodations at work as a result of their symptoms, such as shortened schedules, adjusted expectations for constant digital communication, and even maximizing possible disability benefits.⁹ In the same CWCI survey, out of over 3,700 long-COVID patients, 45% reported requiring a reduced work schedule compared to pre-illness.¹⁰

¹ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e8b5f63562c031c16e36a93/t/5f459ef7798e8b6037fa6c57/1598398215120/2020+Survivor+Corps+COVID-19+%27Long+Hauler%27+Symptoms+Survey+Report+%28Revised+July+25.4%29.pdf>

² <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.12.24.20248802v2>

³ <https://newrepublic.com/article/161102/covid-19-long-haulers-chronic-disease-health-care>

⁴ https://covid19.healthdata.org/global?view=infections-testing&tab=trend&test=positive_tests

⁵ <https://www.ssa.gov/disability/>

⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/03/963730442/do-people-who-have-long-term-covid-19-symptoms-qualify-for-disability-benefits>

⁷ <https://www.insurancebusinessmag.com/us/news/workers-comp/workers-compensation-insurers-struggle-with-longterm-coronavirus-fallout-251049.aspx>

⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-so-many-covid-19-workers-comp-claims-are-being-rejected-11613316304>

⁹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-challenges-of-getting-long-covid-patients-back-to-work-11613350801>

¹⁰ <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.12.24.20248802v2>

Furthermore, many long-COVID patients report that not having to commute and being able to work in the comfort of their home has significantly made their return to work more feasible.¹¹

The COVID Patient Recovery Alliance is a multi-sector group of organizations whose mission is to define, develop, and assist in implementing a national strategy to characterize, diagnose, ensure care for, and sustainably fund the full recovery of individuals with long-COVID. To address the unprecedented and long-term consequences of COVID-19, the Alliance is developing national solutions that link diverse data sources, inform the development of models of care, and ensure adequate payment for the care and full recovery of these patients.

Research is underway to help understand long-COVID and the unique challenges it presents for patients and the American health care system. Learn more at COVID19PatientRecovery.org.

¹¹ See 8.