

Chest  
Heart &  
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Scotland



# RETURNING TO WORK



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

# **This Essential Guide is about returning to work with a medical condition.**

## **It explains:**

- What difficulties you may face returning to work.
- What your rights are at work, as a person with ongoing symptoms.
- What accommodations your workplace could make.
- Where you can find support.

# Returning to Work

Getting back to your job can be an important part of recovery. It can offer a return to routine and a sense of normality. As well as the reassurance of having an income.

However, it can be very challenging and scary to get back to work while you are still experiencing symptoms. It is important that you return to work only when you are ready, and that you know your rights at work.

If you do return to work, it's important that you have a support system around you. You should feel well supported by your employer and take into account your symptoms. They might mean you perform your job a bit differently now.

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# When to go back to work

The most important thing about returning to work after a medical crisis or new diagnosis is that you **don't return before you're ready**.

Speak to your manager (if you have one) about your symptoms and any concerns you have.

A phased return to work can be a great way to test out whether you are ready to go back to work. This could mean you start on reduced hours and slowly increase.

Not everyone has the luxury of phased return to work. It can be very scary to feel pushed into a choice between unemployment and returning to work too soon. Make sure you discuss the choice with someone you trust, and consider the dangers of returning to work.

# What if I can't go back to work?

It may be the case you cannot easily return to your previous job. This might be because of your line of work, your symptoms, or how long you have been absent.

This does not have to be a disaster!

For many people, leaving work can be an opportunity to find a new path in life. Even under stressful circumstances you can build a life which is better suited to your health.

If you are struggling with money, benefits and help are available. Some options are listed at the end of this booklet. You can also find out what help is available to you through the Citizens Advice Bureau in Scotland. Go to **[www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland)** to find out more.

# Phased return to work

A phased return is one of the most valuable tools to safely return to work.

Phased return to work is an approach where you initially return to work with fewer responsibilities, fewer hours, or fewer days per week than before. This allows you to test how much you can healthily do. It can be a safer way to return to work than going straight back to your usual duties.

You may be paid less during a phased return to work, because of reduced hours, but you should return to full pay later.

If you think a phased return to work will be helpful for you, check your company's policies to see whether it's something they are used to doing. If you have a line manager, speak to them or to HR about the possibility of phased return to work. Occupational Health or Occupational Therapy may also be able to support you. 6

# Occupational Health

If you are employed by a company or organisation, you should have access to an Occupational Health department or service. This may be directly provided by the company, or it may be a third-party service from a specialist company or the NHS.

Occupational Health is a service specialising in supporting people's health at work. They will be able to help with:

- absence management
- adjustments and accommodations at work
- accessing support
- risk assessments
- health and safety promotion

If you aren't sure how to access Occupational Health, speak to your manager or HR.

# Your rights at work

As an employee, you have a right to be protected and supported at work.

Long-term illness, or disability, is a **protected characteristic** under the Equalities Act (2010). You should not be discriminated against for a long-term illness in any way.

The Equalities Act (2010) means your employment cannot be terminated as a result of illness or disability. Except when it can be proved that you cannot do your job even with all reasonable adjustments made.

Your employer is responsible for any reasonable adjustments. This includes paying for any assistive equipment and aids.

You do not have to disclose any details of your condition to anyone unless you feel comfortable doing so. However, if you do not tell your employer about a disability, they are not required to do anything about it.

# Reasonable adjustments

A key part of your employer's responsibility to you is to provide **reasonable adjustments** to accommodate your health condition(s).

Reasonable adjustments are changes made to your working arrangements. They should either allow you to continue doing your job despite your symptoms, or to better care for your health while working.

The adjustments will depend on your symptoms, your job, and what works for you.

Before you return to work, you should agree on these adjustments with your manager. You can involve Occupational Health or other health professionals in this discussion.

The next few pages cover possible adjustments to consider and discuss with your employer.

# Working from home

Working from home, either temporarily or permanently, may be a good way to fit your work to the new needs raised by your symptoms.

If you do end up working from home, it is important that you have a suitable working environment. Where possible you maintain a separation between your work and your home life.

It is also important that you have appropriate, ergonomic equipment. Your workplace may be able to provide items like chairs, desks, and computer stands.



# Adjusting for fatigue

If you are experiencing fatigue, the following work adjustments might be worth considering to help you.



Working reduced hours, or moving to part-time.



Reducing physical aspects of your job where possible.



Working from home.



Moving your office to a more accessible place, or providing nearby parking.



Tailoring absence policies to allow for rest breaks and periods of severe fatigue.



Building rest periods into your work day.

# Adjusting for cognitive symptoms

You may be able to reduce the impact of cognitive and memory problems at work by:



Writing down tasks or instructions, or getting others to write them for you.



Using note-taking software or a recording app in meetings, so you can go back to them later.



Minimising distractions in the workspace.



Using memory aids.



Avoiding scheduling too many high-focus tasks in one day.

# Adjusting for breathlessness

If you have a respiratory problem, there are some adjustments you can consider in the workplace to reduce your problems with breathlessness:



Implementing a fragrance-free policy in your workplace, reducing exposure to aerosols and other chemicals which may exacerbate breathlessness.



Reducing the number of stairs you may have to go up or down at work.



Changing your work responsibilities where they may involve triggers like high activity or dust particles.



Having air purification devices in your workspace. 13

# Adjusting for difficulty communicating

If you have communication difficulties such as aphasia or hearing problems, this can make work more difficult. It may help to:



Ask for written records of conversations and key points.



Have your employer provide communication aids.



Change job responsibilities to require less direct communication.



Use text if this is easier for you.



Make sure that all meeting rooms are fitted with a hearing loop or other communication support.

If you have a speech and language therapist, they may be able to advise you or help you.

# Adjusting for mobility problems

If your condition reduces/limits your mobility, your employer may be able to help by:



Moving your office to be easily accessible from ground floor parking, and, if necessary, to be closer to public transport



Reducing or changing tasks that require physical activity.



Ensuring wheelchair access and the provision of accessible toilets in the workplace.



Increasing the use of remote work and remote meetings in order to minimise travel.

Occupational Therapists are often helpful in deciding these adjustments.

# Adjusting for other symptoms

You may also experience other symptoms such as dizziness, pain, or joint problems. The following adjustments may help:



Providing ergonomic equipment like seats, desks, and keyboards to reduce joint strain.



Providing accessible office spaces or parking.



Increasing flexibility in performance management and assessment.



Providing a “rest room” where you can go to recover if you experience bad symptoms.



Reducing work that requires standing.

# What if my employer won't help?

Unfortunately, some employers may not meet their legal responsibilities to support you to work with a long-term condition.

You should first speak to your HR department if you feel wrongly treated based on your health. This can include being fired, discriminated against, or refused a job solely based on a disability which would not stop you from doing the job.

If this does not resolve the issue, or your workplace does not have an HR department, speak to ACAS ([www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)) or the Citizens Advice Bureau ([www.cas.org.uk](http://www.cas.org.uk)).

You should be able to enter **reconciliation** with an independent expert to settle the matter. If you still can't meet an agreement, you may ultimately choose to take your employer to tribunal.

# What if I'm self-employed?

All of the advice in this booklet has assumed that you are employed by a registered company. Of course, this is not true for everyone.

If you are self-employed or work on a shift basis, you may face additional difficulties in continuing to work.

There is financial help available to support you if you are no longer able to make a living wage because of your disability or medical condition.

You may be able to use the Access to Work grant to help you to retrain or make adjustments, as you are your own employer.

You may need to provide your business accounts when applying for financial support, to prove that you are self-employed.

# Finding support

## **ACAS**

A service offering impartial support and advice to employees and employers.

[www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

## **Citizens Advice Scotland**

The Scottish branch of the Citizens Advice Bureau, which advises on benefits and government support in your area.

[www.cas.org.uk](http://www.cas.org.uk) or call **0800 028 1456**

## **Access to Work grants**

A government grant your employer may be able to get to support workplace adjustments.

[www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

## **Benefits assistance**

A government page signposting to various help and support with accessing benefits.

[www.mygov.scot/benefits-support](http://www.mygov.scot/benefits-support)

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For free, confidential advice and support from our Advice Line Team, contact:

**0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9am-4pm)**

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**[advice@chss.org.uk](mailto:advice@chss.org.uk)**

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Updated: Dec 2025  
Next review: Dec 2028

E14-v1.0-Dec25