

# Returning to work and COVID-19

## What you need to know

Going back to work is a major step in your recovery.

Going back to work after a sick leave can be worrying, not to mention challenging because of the evolving nature of long COVID symptoms, such as fatigue, difficulty concentrating, post-exertional malaise, etc.



Before going back to work, it's best to wait until you've recovered enough to get through your daily routine. While there are many benefits to returning to work (e.g., financial, social, self-esteem), it can also aggravate the symptoms if done too soon or too quickly. A gradual return to work might be best in your situation.

Your doctor must sign off on your return to work. You also need to be actively involved in the process! But, remember there are a number of other people involved in your return to work, including health professionals, your employer, your immediate supervisor, your colleagues, and your insurance company. **We encourage you to send them all a copy of this information sheet.**

### Strategies for a successful return to work

#### Planning a return to work

1. Talk to your health professionals (physiotherapist, occupational therapist, psychologist, etc.) about returning to work.
  - They will make recommendations to your doctor about how to tailor the return to work to your specific needs.
2. Get a medical opinion.
  - Talk to your doctor about the terms and conditions of your return to work. They will be able to make recommendations and approve your return-to-work plan. They can also issue restrictions, especially if you work in a job that's physically, mentally, or emotionally taxing (e.g., heavy lifting; quick, high-pressure decisions; working with clients in distress).
  - If possible, make sure your return-to-work plan is flexible and adjustable, since your condition may vary from day to day.

### Gradual return to work

#### Did you know?

A realistic and achievable return-to-work plan is your ticket to success! Which is why you should start slowly—only a few hours and limited tasks—to make sure your first few weeks go smoothly. Your return-to-work plan might involve:

- Working shorter days instead of 7 consecutive hours;
- Starting and finishing at different times depending on your energy level throughout the day;
- Taking a day off between two work days;
- Adding breaks to your schedule. Short breaks give you time to recover and let you continue working, and they're actually more effective than long breaks;
- Doing less work;
- Taking longer to do a task;
- Modifying certain tasks;
- Avoiding tasks that make your symptoms worse;
- When planning your return to work (in terms of time and energy), don't forget about your commute. Driving and commuting can be physically and mentally draining.

- Suggest a meeting with your supervisor to plan your return to work and go over your tasks and workload together.
- Take the time to explain your concerns and let your supervisor know what you'll need.
  - You are not obligated to disclose your medical condition. However, if you want to, it can be helpful to talk about what you can and can't do, as this will help with setting up accommodations, determining your workload, and adjusting expectations about your return to work. Don't hesitate to make suggestions!

- With your supervisor's approval, you could:

#### Adjust your work area

- Find a quiet place to work from home;
- Set up your work area (e.g., office on the main floor to avoid stairs);
- Do your work differently (e.g., sitting instead of standing);
- Add equipment as needed (e.g., ergonomic chair).

#### Get support from your colleagues

- Agree to tell your colleagues about your schedule and tasks, to make sure they are supportive and on board;
- Accept help from your colleagues and ask for help when needed.

- Most people have never heard of long COVID. To help your supervisor and colleagues understand this condition, you can refer them to this website: [santemonteregie.qc.ca/en/west/long-covid](https://santemonteregie.qc.ca/en/west/long-covid).

### Prepare for your return to work

- A few weeks before you go back to work, get back into your regular routine and habits (e.g., bedtime and wakeup time, naps, meal times).
- Try to anticipate any problems and come up with backup plans (e.g., transportation, childcare, fatigue at the end of the day).
- Think ahead about what you feel comfortable sharing with your colleagues: Planning a few things to say can help lessen your anxiety about going back to work.
- Plan fewer personal activities for the first few weeks: Returning to work takes a lot of energy and adjusting of routines.
- Explain to family and friends that going back to work can be demanding and that you may need their support during this time.

### Return to work

- Be kind to yourself and adjust your expectations. It may take some time to feel comfortable with your colleagues again, catch up on changes since you were away, get back into the swing of things, etc.
- Continue to use symptom self-management strategies (e.g., energy management, breathing techniques, meditation, diary).
- Follow up regularly with your doctor and health professionals.
- Plan regular meetings with your supervisor to discuss your return to work and the accommodations in place.
- Remember that fatigue can set in a few days after the exertion. Avoid overdoing it, even on your good days.

### References:

- Supporting occupational health and wellbeing professionals (SOM). (2021). COVID-19 return to work guide: For recovering workers. [www.som.org.uk/COVID-19\\_return\\_to\\_work\\_guide\\_for\\_recovering\\_workers.pdf](https://www.som.org.uk/COVID-19_return_to_work_guide_for_recovering_workers.pdf)
- European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). (2021). COVID-19 infection and long COVID – guide for workers. [osha.europa.eu/en/publications/covid-19-infection-and-long-covid-guide-workers/view](https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/covid-19-infection-and-long-covid-guide-workers/view)

*Despite you returning to work gradually, your symptoms could get worse. Everyone progresses at a different pace, and it's important to respect your limits. Even if you have to scale back or stop working completely, it's not a failure; you'll only be stronger when you eventually do go back.*

If you have questions about long COVID, please email us at: [readaptation.covid.cisssmo16@ssss.gouv.qc.ca](mailto:readaptation.covid.cisssmo16@ssss.gouv.qc.ca).

#### Our mission

To maintain, improve, and restore the health and well-being of the Québec population by making accessible an array of integrated and quality health and social services, while contributing to the social and economic development of Québec.

#### Our vision

Accessible and efficient health care and services that adapt to the needs of Québécois.

#### Our goals

The CISSS de la Montérégie-Ouest achieves its goals through its innovative approaches and stands apart through:

- its exemplary offer of care and integrated services based on interdisciplinarity, accessibility, and adaptability to the needs of its population;
- its willingness to question and improve its professional, clinical, and administrative practices;
- its appreciation of its personnel and the implementation of human resource management practices;
- its strong relationships with its partners.

#### Our values

Our actions are guided by five equal and interconnected values: compassion, collaboration, commitment, confidence and consistency.