

COVID-19 and Return to Work

If you have a worker returning to work after recovering from COVID-19 related illness, here are some things to keep in mind:

Your employee may have some residual symptoms. These symptoms can impact the return to work process, particularly the speed that the employee can gradually return to full hours and duties.

Residual symptoms may include:

- Coughing
- Ongoing fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Heart palpitations
- Joint pain
- Anxiety
- Loss of taste or smell
- “Brain Fog”

“Brain fog” is a term used to describe a cluster of symptoms that affect the individual’s ability to think clearly – they may have struggles with memory, decision making, planning and problem solving. They may feel confused or disorganized or find it hard to focus or put thoughts into words.

When should an employer reasonably expect a return to work?

Your employee can safely return to work when they have reached the milestones and timelines below:

- 10 days post isolation from the onset of symptom and the individual has not had a fever for 24 hours, **without the use of fever-reducing medications**, and their other symptoms have improved.
- Some symptoms such as fatigue and cough may last longer than 10 days, but do not require a longer isolation **as long as the individual has not had a fever for 24 hours as outlined above.**

(source: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-ncov-2019-staff-faq.pdf>)

Proof of a negative test and/or medical note is not required

Proof of a negative COVID-19 test and/or a medical note is not required to return to work in the above scenarios.

If symptoms persist

If symptoms persist and the employee has been off for an extended period, they can return to work with their doctor’s clearance or when cleared by a treating physiotherapist or occupational therapist, or other treatment provider.

It is highly likely your employee will need your support for a gradual return to work.

How can an employer assist in the return to work process?

- Work with the WCB case manager – they will collaborate with you, your employee, and the treatment providers to coordinate the right return to work plan for your employee.
- Consider starting the worker's return with work from home and transitioning to the workplace (in keeping with public health direction).
- Support a gradual return to work—slowly building up hours and duties will help manage fatigue and rebuild stamina.
- If “brain fog” is one of their symptoms, avoid putting the worker in a safety sensitive position until medically cleared.
- If the worker is coughing, allow for extra breaks. **Educate co-workers that although coughing may continue, they are no longer contagious.**
- Do not expect (or offer) strenuous duties early in the return to work as it may aggravate ongoing symptoms such as shortness of breath.
- Allow the employee time and space to get re-introduced back into the workplace, to ensure they feel safe, physically and mentally. **Workers may have anxiety about returning to work where they contracted COVID 19** and need time to feel comfortable in the workplace
- Work with an occupational therapist, if WCB has arranged for one as part of your

employee's care team, to facilitate exposure therapy or a gradual re-introduction to the workplace.

- Symptoms like fatigue and brain fog can come and go and can vary significantly in degree from one day to the next. **Be patient**, and when needed, seek clarification through the medical providers or WCB involved in the employee's care.

Remember - WCB is here to assist with your return-to-work needs.

Stay connected with the case manager and if you have questions, ask! We are all learning together.