

RETURNING TO WORK

Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland



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, offering 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 and when you do return to work, it's important that you have a support system, that you are well-supported by your employer, and that you take care to account for your symptoms.



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 (i.e. starting on reduced hours and slowly increasing) can be a great way to test out whether you are ready to go back to work.

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. If this is you, 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 that, because of your line of work, because of your symptoms, or because of how long you have been absent, you cannot easily return to your previous job.

This does not have to be a disaster!

For many people, leaving work, even under stressful circumstances, can be an opportunity to find a new path in life and to build a life which is better-suited to their 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** to find out more.

Phased return to work

A phased return is one of the most valuable tools in a safe return to work after illness.

Phased return to work is an approach where you initially return to work with fewer responsibilities, fewer hours, or fewer days per week than you are used to. This allows you to test how much you can healthily do, and 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. An Occupational Health or Occupational Therapy may also be able to support you.

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.

Under the Equalities Act (2010) your employment cannot be terminated as a result of illness or disability, unless 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 should not be discriminated against for a long-term illness in any way. Long-term illness, or disability, is a **protected characteristic** under the Equalities Act (2010).

You do not have to disclose any details of your condition to anyone unless you feel comfortable doing so, but 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 any changes made to your working arrangements which 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, and that 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

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.

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.

If you feel that you have been fired, discriminated against, or refused a job solely on the basis of a disability that would not stop you from doing the job in question, you should speak in the first instance to your HR department.

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

You should be able to enter **reconciliation** with an independent expert to settle the matter. If, despite reconciliation, you 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. This is, of course, 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, as a result of your disability or medical condition, you are no longer able to make a living wage.

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

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 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

Benefits assistance

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

www.mygov.scot/benefits-support

Our publications are available for free to anyone in Scotland who needs them. Go to www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub for all our resources, including other Essential Guides in this series.

For free, confidential advice and support from our **Advice Line nurses**, call: 0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm), text: NURSE to 66777 or email: adviceline@chss.org.uk.

Across Scotland, over one million people – that's one in five of us – are living with the effects of a chest, heart or stroke condition. We are here to help everyone who needs us. But we need your support to do this. Go to www.chss.org.uk/supportus to find out how you can help more people in Scotland.

If you would like this resource in an alternative format, please contact our Advice Line nurses.

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NO LIFE HALF LIVED

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