Return to work for people with Long Covid

Assoc. Professor Rob Griffiths
OAM/RTRU

University of Otago
ŌTĀKOU WHAKAIHU WAKA
Pōneke Wellington Campus

Long Covid Definitions

WHO

The continuation or development of new symptoms 3 months after the initial SARS-CoV-2 infection, with these symptoms lasting for at least 2 months with no other explanation.

CDC

Post-COVID Conditions (PCC)", is an infection-associated chronic condition that can occur after SARS-CoV-2 infection, the virus that causes COVID-19, and is present for at least 3 months as a continuous, relapsing and remitting, or progressive disease state that affects one or more organ systems.

NICE

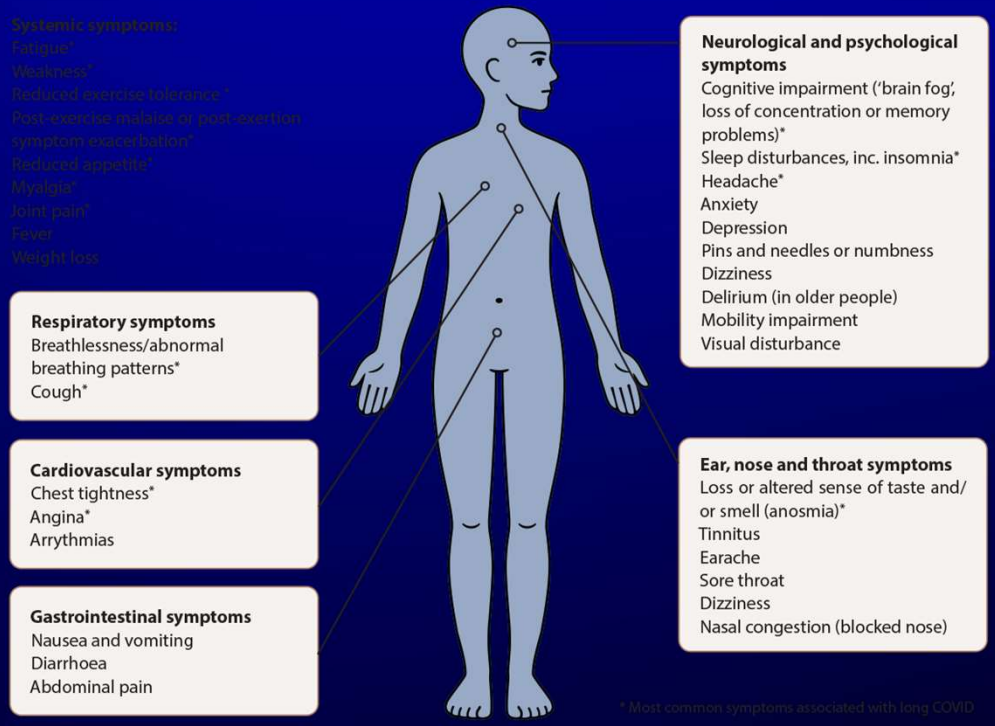
(1) Ongoing symptomatic COVID-19 for people who still have symptoms between 4 and 12 weeks after the start of acute symptoms;

(2) Post-COVID-19 syndrome for people who still have symptoms for more than 12 weeks after the start of acute symptoms

Tan KWA, Koh D. Long COVID-Challenges in diagnosis and managing return-to-work. J Occup Health. 2023 Jan;65(1):e12401. doi: 10.1002/1348-9585.12401. PMID: 37098838; PMCID: PMC10132176.

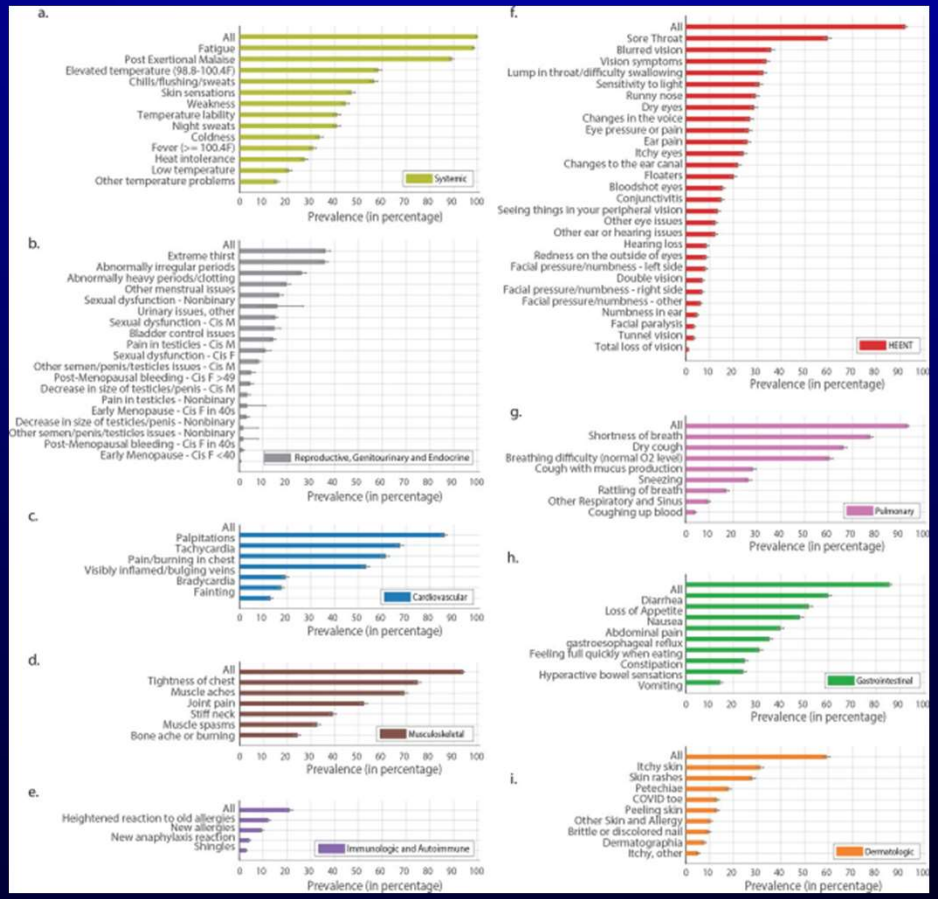
Long Covid Defined

- One of a number of post-viral syndromes – influenza, coryza, SARS/MERS, EBV, WNV, HIV etc.
- Physical sequelae of acute illness less common
- Overlap with ME/CFS
- 5-20% of people infected/ reinfected with Covid will get Long Covid
- Various names – Long Covid, Post Acute Covid Syndrome, Post Acute Covid Condition, Long Haulers
- Heterogeneous – 200+ symptoms
- Different patterns of "symptom cluster"
- No diagnostic test as yet
- Risk halved by vaccination
- Various treatments under evaluation
- Often have co-morbidities or precarious employment



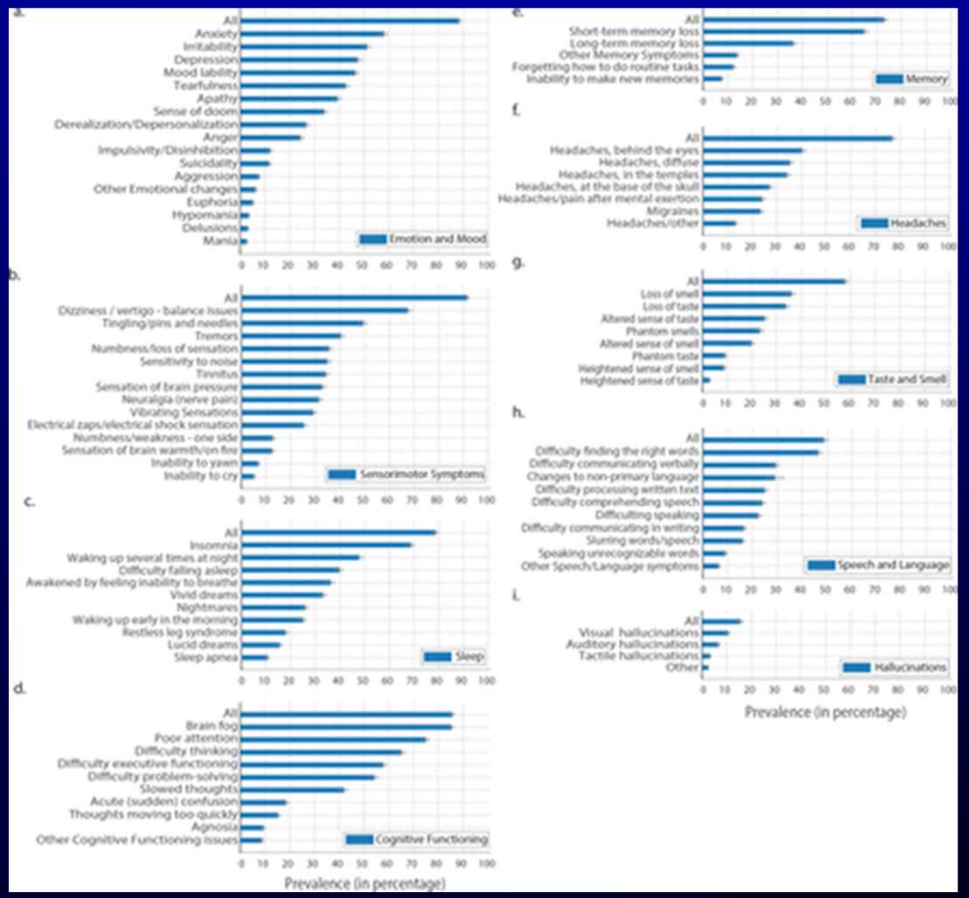
Physical Effects

- Systemic – Fatigue, malaise, PEMS, flushes
- Cardiac – arrhythmias, POTS
- Neurological – dysautonomia, CNS loss
- Respiratory
- Visual
- ENT
- Gynaecological
- Gastrointestinal
- Endocrine
- Immunologic
- Dermatologic
- Pain/musculoskeletal
- Post Exertional Symptom Exacerbation PESE



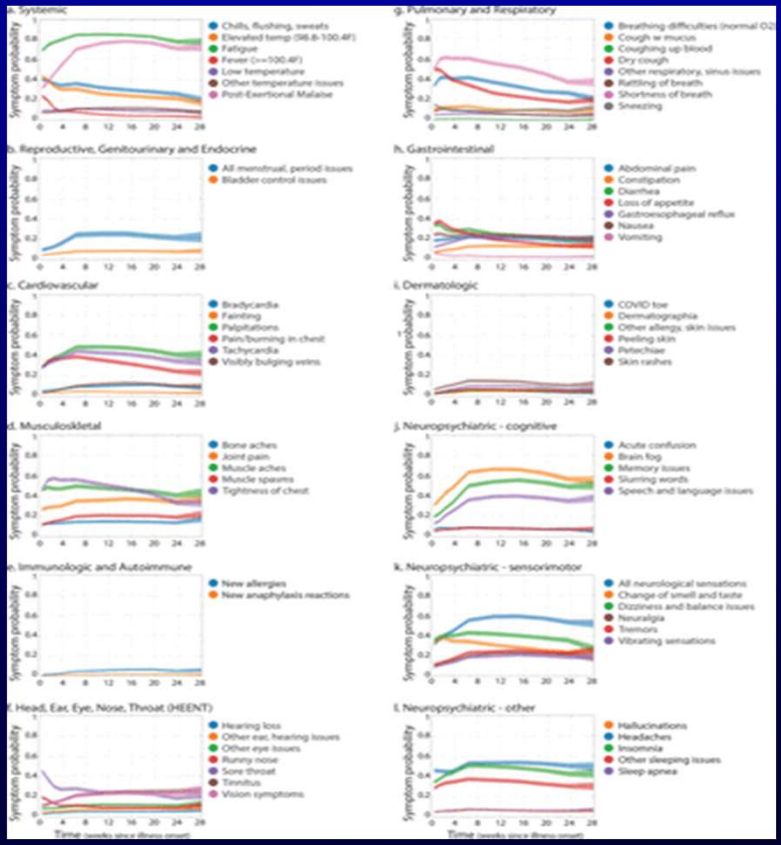
Neuropsychological Effects

- Emotion/mood – anxiety, depression
- Uncertainty & apathy
- Cognitiion – “brain fog”
- Memory
- Headaches
- Sensory
- Sensorimotor
- Speech & language
- Sleep
- Executive function



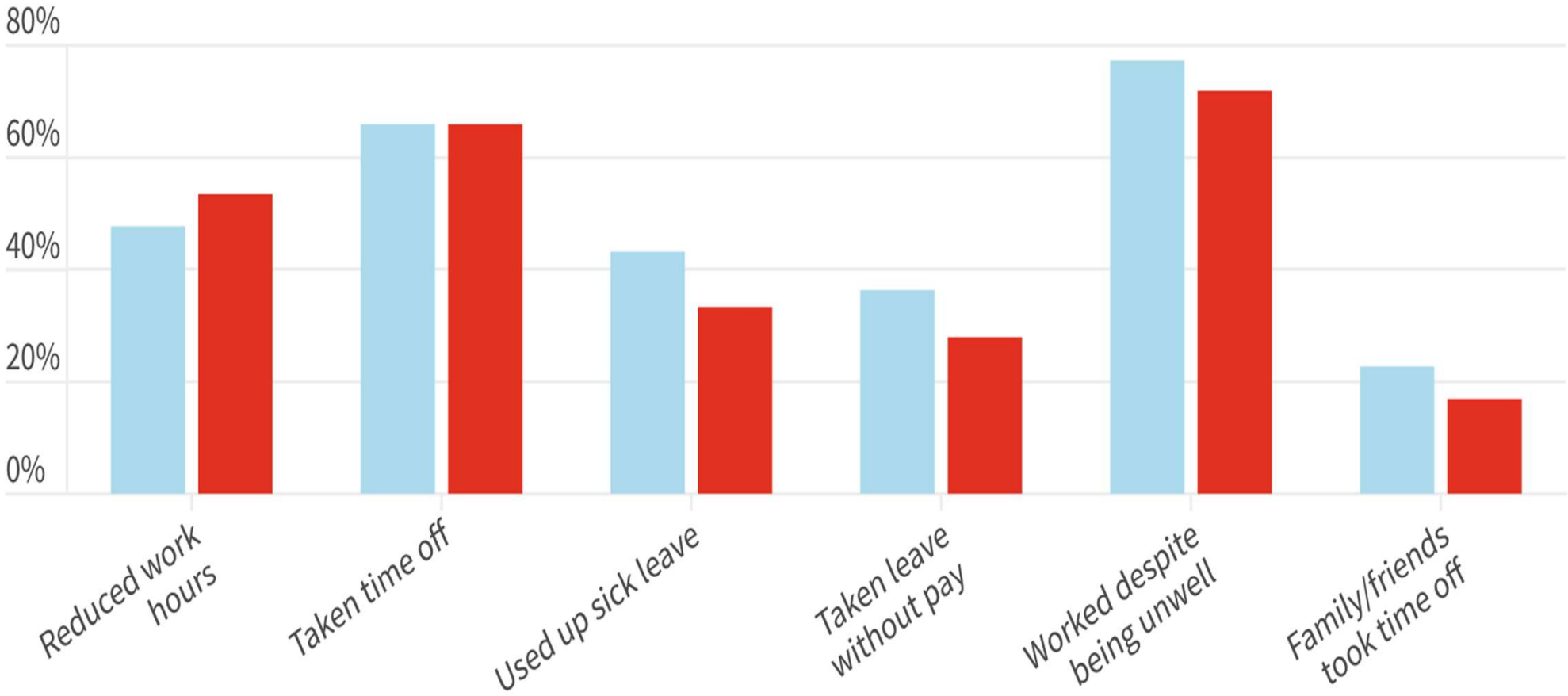
Symptom Duration

- Largely by extrapolation
- May depend on underlying processes – virus persistence or reactivation, inflammation, autonomic, cellular damage, hormone changes, immune dysregulation, etc
- Major interpersonal differences
- Symptoms don't decline linearly
- Symptoms within a cluster decline variably
- Pattern of remissions and relapses
- "Boom and Bust" typical of PACS
- Symptom-guided exercise most effective



Bock A. Researchers See Hope in Symptom-Guided Exercise for Long COVID With Postexertional Malaise. JAMA. 2024;331(19):1609–1611. doi:10.1001/jama.2024.7255

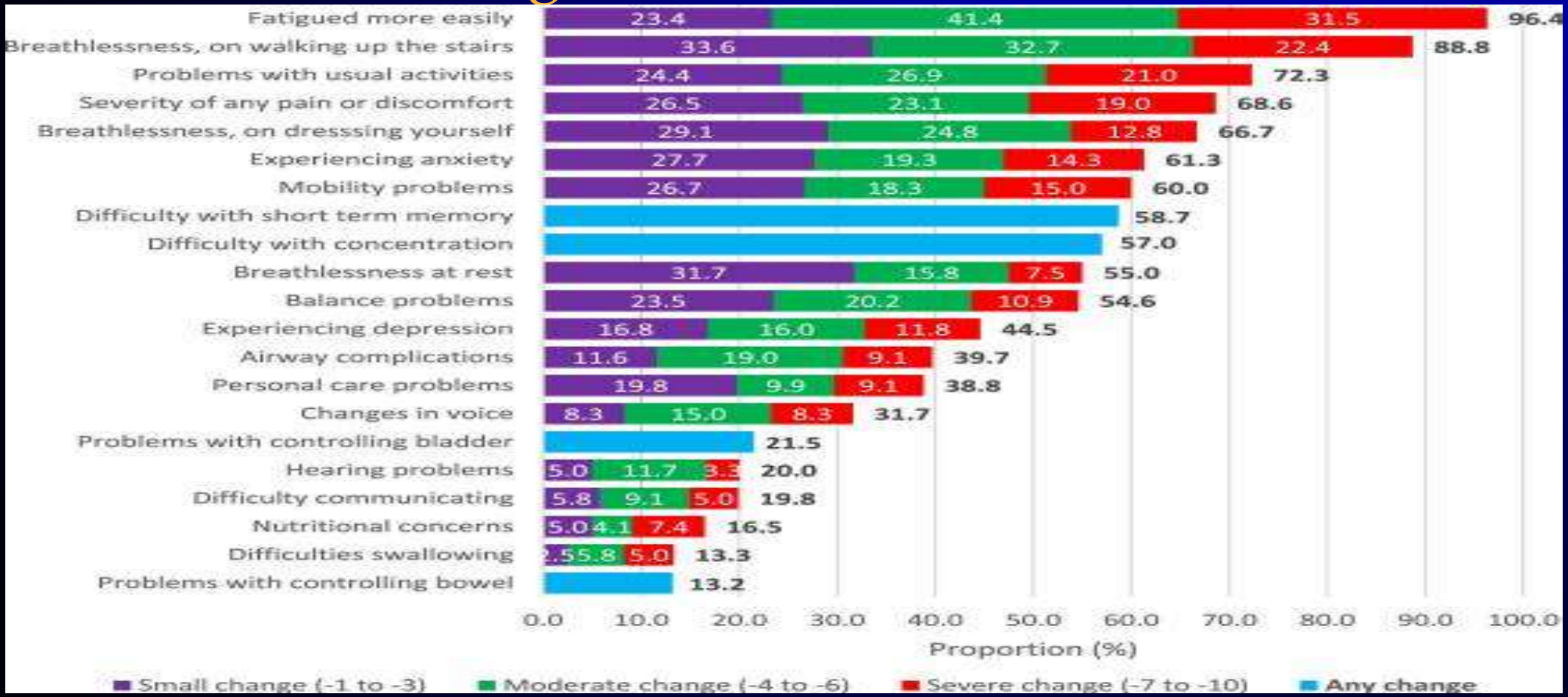
Long Covid impacts on productivity for Māori and non-Māori



Source: Long Covid Registry • Chart: Marc Daalder

newsroom.

Long Covid & Function



Mazer B, Ehrmann Feldman D. Functional Limitations in Individuals With Long COVID. Arch Phys Med Rehabil. 2023 Sep;104(9):1378-1384

Long Covid and Occupation

Most at risk:

- Health professionals
- Teachers
- Corrections staff
- Hospitality staff

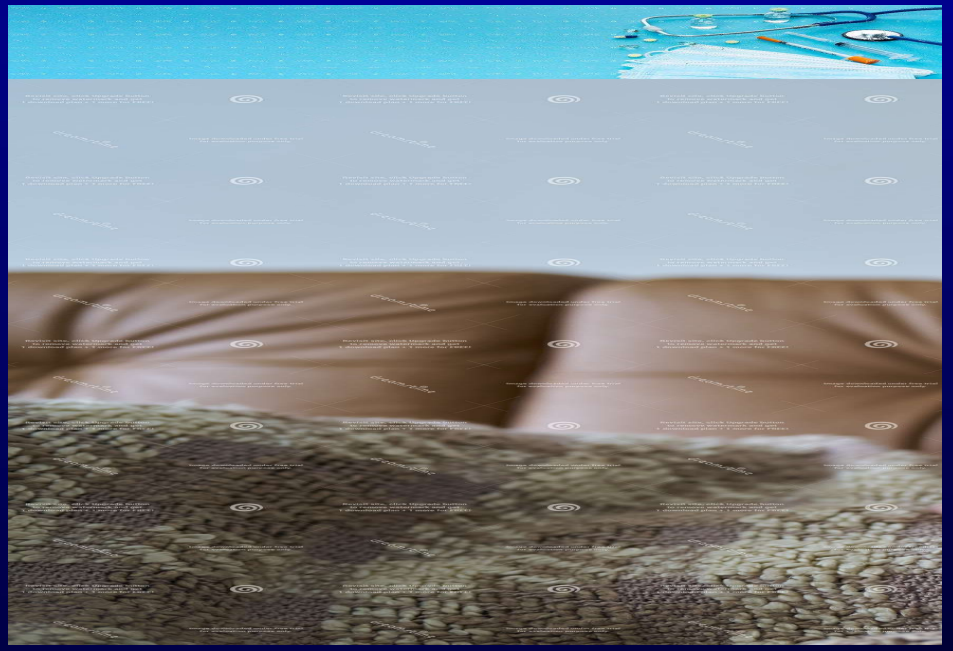
Greatest safety concern:

- Truck, train & bus drivers
- Airline pilots
- First responders

Public Health Expert Briefing (ISSN 2816-1203)

General Principles of Return to Work for PACS

- Don't rush to seek medical retirement
- 48% reduced hours, 20% not working, 32% RTW[1]
- Treatment is supportive not curative
- Education ("gaslighting")
- Encourage self-management; limited resources
- Promote rest, sleep, manage insomnia, & diet
- Environment for trust & open communication
- Individualised self-pacing
- Be flexible
- Establish workplace supports[2]
- Re-orient or re-organise tasks
- Involve buddy, peer support, union rep
- Focus on what people can do, not can't



1. O Connor R J, Parkin A, Mir G, Mullard J, Baley S, Ceolta-Smith J et al. Work and vocational rehabilitation for people living with long covid BMJ 2024; 385 :e076508 doi:10.1136/bmj-2023-076508
2. "For employers and employees" Long Covid Support Aotearoa, accessed on line 24/08/2024

Work Solutions 1

Symptom	**Accommodations**
Extreme fatigue, energy fluctuations, and post-exertional malaise	•Flexible work hours •Part-time work options •Opportunities for daytime rest •Remote or hybrid work •Letting people organize work priorities around their personal energy windows (“spoon planning”)
Cognitive difficulties, cognitive fatigue, and brain fog	•Task reminders •Written instructions •Quiet workspaces to reduce distractions •Asynchronous work •Flexible hours to enable work in higher-energy periods •Project assignments that avoid urgent deadlines •Recording meetings and/or getting transcripts for future reference

Courtesy Harvard Business Review Great Ideas

Work Solutions 2

Symptom	Accommodations
Sleep issues (insomnia, unrefreshing and poor-quality sleep, sleep apnea, and circadian rhythm problems)	Flexible work hours Asynchronous work Allowing individual employees to join meetings or schedule shifts within preferred windows of time
Mobility limitations and neuromuscular dysfunction	Providing mobility aids and assistive devices (e.g., tools that help someone reach and grip items, joint and back supports, wheeled bags, walkers, canes, and scooters) Ensuring that workspaces allow for mobility aids and assistive devices

Work Solutions 3

Symptom	Accommodations
Gastrointestinal and urinary symptoms	Frequent bathroom breaks Allergy- and sensitivity-friendly food options at group events Accessible bathrooms Remote work
Chronic pain (including but not limited to headaches and joint, muscle, and chest pain)	For photosensitivity, allowing employees to wear sunglasses or blue-light-blocking glasses; providing screen-glare reduction tools such as software or screen protectors; keeping overhead lighting lower and adjustable; allowing cameras to be off in meetings For sound sensitivity, offering quiet workspaces or providing earplugs or noise-canceling headphones Talk-to-text software to replace typing Ergonomic workstation setups Mobility devices to use in the office Letting employees work in the physical position most comfortable to them (e.g., reclining, supine, or sitting up, with supports like pillows or braces)

Work Solutions

Symptom	**Accommodations**
Extreme fatigue, energy fluctuations, and post-exertional malaise	•Flexible work hours •Part-time work options •Opportunities for daytime rest •Remote or hybrid work •Letting people organize work priorities around their personal energy windows (“spoon planning”)
Cognitive difficulties, cognitive fatigue, and brain fog	•Task reminders •Written instructions •Quiet workspaces to reduce distractions •Asynchronous work •Flexible hours to enable work in higher-energy periods •Project assignments that avoid urgent deadlines

Work Solutions 4

Symptom	Accommodations
Respiratory issues, increased allergies, and environmental sensitivities	Improved office ventilation and air filtration (e.g., open windows, HEPA filters, air quality sensors) Allowing employees to wear a mask of their choosing at work Using unscented, nontoxic, and zero-fragrance cleaning products Creating no-fragrance office policies, or asking employees not to wear scented products Inspecting the office for mold or water damage Using no-VOC (volatile organic compound) paints and materials in the office
The need to avoid infectious illness (Covid or otherwise)	Offering remote-work options for immunocompromised or vulnerable employees Allowing employees to wear a mask of their choosing at work Improving office ventilation and air filtration (e.g., open windows, HEPA filters)

Where to get information & advice on Long Covid

Long Covid Support Aotearoa – A support group for people in New Zealand with Long Covid

Ministry of Health. 2022. Clinical rehabilitation guideline for people with long COVID (coronavirus disease) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

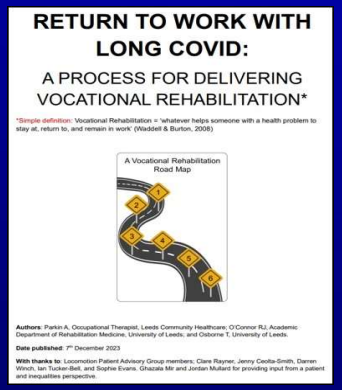
Healthline – Free call on 0800 611 116 for health advice

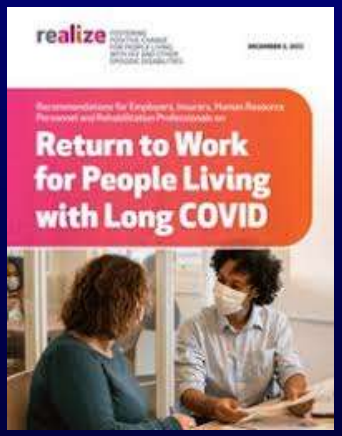
Victoria University literature reviews – A monthly summary of the latest research on Long Covid

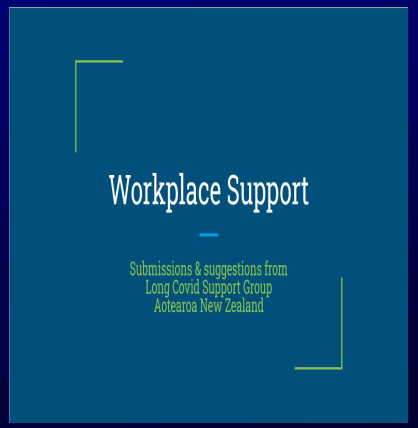
Healthify – Advice on managing Long Covid

https://www.cipd.org/en/knowledge/guides/long-covid-guides-people-managers/

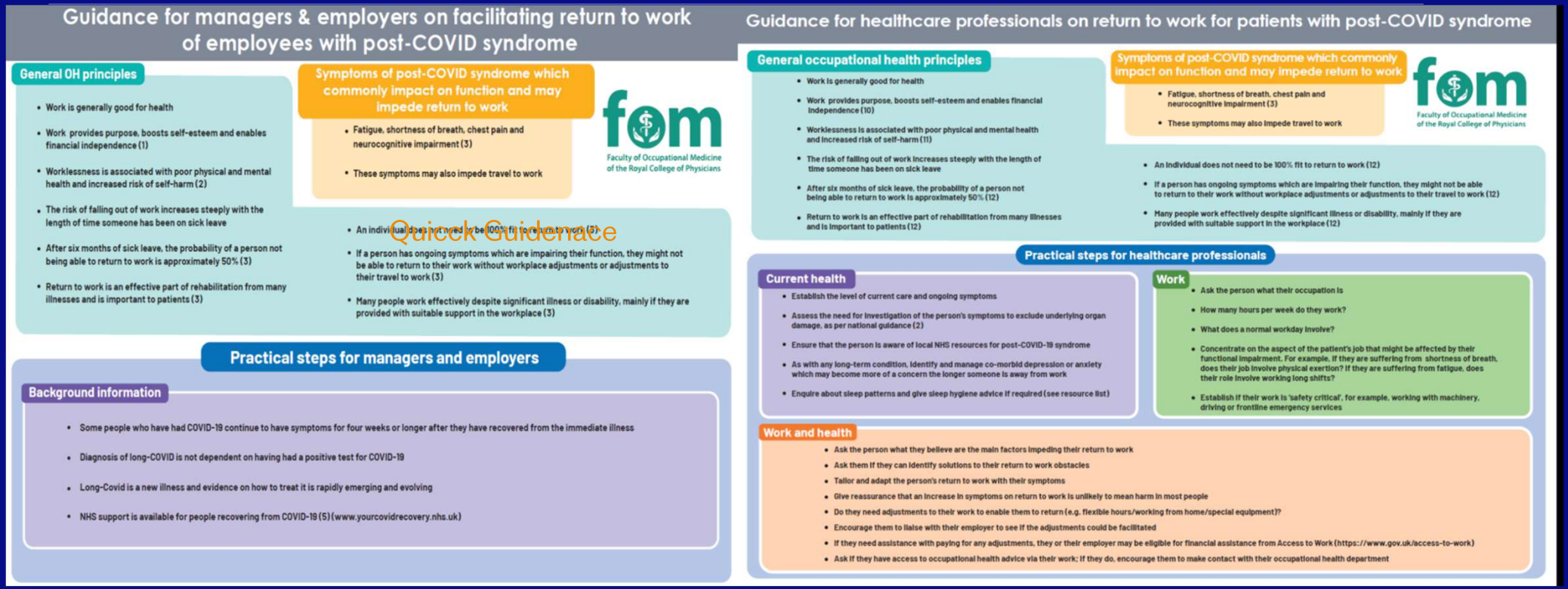
https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/Long_COVID_and_Return_to_Work_What_Works.pdf







Quick Guidance



BMJ Open 2023;13:e069217. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2022-069217

References

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. Long-Term Health Effects of COVID-19: Disability and Function Following SARS-CoV-2 Infection. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/27756.

Lunt J, Hemming S, Burton K, Elander J, Baraniak A. What workers can tell us about post-COVID workability. Occup Med (Lond). 2024 Feb 19;74(1):15-23. doi: 10.1093/occmed/kqac086. PMID: 35968657; PMCID: PMC9384751.

Walker S, Goodfellow H, Pookarnjanamorakot P, et al. Impact of fatigue as the primary determinant of functional limitations among patients with post-COVID-19 syndrome: a cross-sectional observational study BMJ Open 2023;13:e069217. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2022-069217

O'Sullivan O, Houston A, Ladlow P, Barker-Davies RM, Chamley R, Bennett AN, Nicol ED, Holdsworth DA. Factors influencing medium- and long-term occupational impact following COVID-19. Occup Med (Lond). 2024 Feb 19;74(1):53-62. doi: 10.1093/occmed/kqad041. PMID: 37101240.

Griffiths ML, Gray BJ, Kyle RG, Davies AR. Seeking Good Work in the COVID-19 Recovery: Shifting Priorities and Employment Choices Among Workers. J Occup Environ Med. 2023 Jan 1;65(1):86-92. doi: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000002694. Epub 2022 Sep 6. PMID: 36070537; PMCID: PMC9835240.

Tryfonos A, Pourhamidi K, Jörnåker G, et al. Functional Limitations and Exercise Intolerance in Patients With Post-COVID Condition: A Randomized Crossover Clinical Trial. JAMA Netw Open. 2024;7(4):e244386. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.4386

Question Time

Thank you!

University of Otago
ŌTĀKOU WHAKAIHU WAKA

Pōneke
Wellington
Campus