Long COVID, Disability, and Underserved Communities: Recommendations for Employers

What Do We Know About Long COVID and the Workplace?

Long COVID is not one condition. It represents many potentially overlapping symptoms, likely with different biological causes and different sets of risk factors and outcomes. In 2022, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)—in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and National Institutes of Health, as well as patient groups, medical societies, and other experts—developed a working definition of Long COVID. They broadly defined Long COVID as signs, symptoms, and conditions that continue or develop after initial COVID-19 or SARS-CoV-2 infection. The signs, symptoms, and conditions are present four weeks or more after the initial phase of infection; may be multisystemic; and may present with a relapsing–remitting pattern and progression or worsening over time, with the possibility of severe and life-threatening events even months or years after infection.1

U.S. Census Bureau data shows that an estimated 1.4% of adults (people over the age of 18) in the United States currently experience significant activity limitations due to Long COVID.2 The CDC reports that Long COVID can result in long-lasting physical and mental complications that may affect a person’s ability to do everyday activities, including working.3 The most common symptoms, which can be particularly disruptive to work, include shortness of breath, fatigue and weakness, depression, anxiety, and symptoms that impact thinking and remembering. Survey data have shown that a quarter of people with Long COVID report that it affected their employment. Most people with Long COVID in the workforce were still doing the same job or kind of job, but they worked fewer hours and earned less money.4

Long COVID has different impacts on different groups of people. People from historically underserved communities are more likely to experience prolonged complications. Women with Long COVID are twice as likely as men to report significant activity limitations. People with disabilities with Long COVID are nearly seven times more likely to report substantial activity limitations.

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4 Data from the Understanding America Study survey (See Ham, 2022): between May 12 and June 22, 2021, data from 4,900 respondents found that 25.9% of those with Long COVID reported that it affected their employment or work hours. The majority of those affected remained employed and in the same employment type, while work hours and paychecks declined.
To help employers understand the impacts of Long COVID on employment, especially for people with disabilities and other underserved groups, researchers from the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) reviewed and synthesized relevant research published between 2021 and 2023. The EARN team and the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) also conducted a Long COVID@Work Roundtable at the 2022 Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC) annual conference. Journal articles, reports, and the outcomes of the roundtable informed this research. The team reviewed information from federal and state surveys and administrative data to find data sources useful in understanding Long COVID and its impact on employment. Findings from the online dialogue, *Understanding and Addressing the Workplace Challenges Related to Long COVID*, were reviewed as well. Online dialogues are a crowdsourcing tool used to engage constituents and enable the government to gather the public’s input on key policy issues to help understand the employment challenges and opportunities faced by disabled people across the country. This Research-to-Practice Brief summarizes the EARN research team’s findings and describes the current state of knowledge about how Long COVID impacts workers. This information can help organizations develop workplace policies that ensure the effective inclusion of people with Long COVID, especially people with disabilities who also belong to other historically underserved groups.

**Key Issues in Responding to Long COVID in the Workplace**

EARN’s review of available research and data identified six major topics that affect the development of future workplace policies and practices. These include the need:

1. To **increase awareness** of the evolving definition of Long COVID.
2. To **build greater understanding** of the impact of Long COVID on employment, especially for members of underserved communities, including people with disabilities.
3. To **understand health disparities**, health inequities, and social determinants of health.
4. For **mental health supports**.
5. For **flexible workplace and accommodation policies**.
6. For **collaboration between employers, policymakers, health benefits insurers and providers, and researchers** to further understand the impact of Long COVID on employment, especially for disabled people with intersecting identities.

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Recommended Actions for Organizations

Increase awareness of the evolving definition of Long COVID

The previously referenced working definition will continue to evolve. There is no single agreed-upon definition of Long COVID, which hampers understanding, treatment, and accommodations that people with Long COVID might need to work.9 Policymakers, health benefits insurers and providers, health care providers, employers, and researchers must continue to build consensus on a definition of Long COVID. The ambiguity of how Long COVID is defined makes it challenging for people with the condition to access disability benefits and health care services, as there is no standard set of criteria to which insurers and employers can refer when assessing a person’s eligibility.10

Promote understanding and education

Employers should be aware of the challenges to diagnose and document Long COVID. Long COVID and its associated conditions can cause symptoms that come and go and may change over time. It can also include a diverse array of symptoms, which can be mild to debilitating. Understanding how it can affect a person’s health in various ways can help employers better support the needs of employees with Long COVID conditions. The online dialogue report recommends that employers focus less on workers receiving a specific diagnosis, and instead acknowledge the resulting limitations and continuing abilities when determining accommodations for employees with Long COVID.11

Employers need support from policymakers and health care providers to become informed about Long COVID, including its impact on the physical and mental health of workers and how Long COVID may be considered a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).12

Education and training can help reduce stigma and increase understanding, leading to better support for workers with Long COVID. Employers should proactively provide information and resources to their employees, especially managers, supervisors, and human resources (HR) staff, to build awareness of and empathy toward workers with Long COVID.

Understand and address health disparities related to Long COVID

People from underserved communities are often disproportionately affected by Long COVID, especially disabled people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Members of these communities experience systemic barriers to accessing health care, support services, and interventions for Long COVID as a result of historic stigma toward some communities and inequitable past policies that provided them with fewer resources.13 Long COVID can further exacerbate pre-existing health disparities and affect income, employment status, and access to benefits for workers who belong to underserved communities.

References


Related resources

communities. Policymakers need to ensure that existing ADA resources are shared with underserved communities to raise awareness of ADA protections, such as the right to reasonable accommodations for employees and applicants with disabilities. Policymakers need to ensure that existing ADA resources are shared with underserved communities to raise awareness of ADA protections, such as the right to reasonable accommodations for employees and applicants with disabilities.14 Underserved communities also need resources that acknowledge their historical backgrounds and address their specific concerns.

Employers should learn more about the disproportionate impact of Long COVID on members of underserved communities regarding health outcomes, employment, and access to services. Doing so can ensure that workplace policies, programs, and supports are inclusive and address the different needs of specific groups. Employers should ensure that their existing workplace programs are accessible to all employees by providing trainings and educational material about Long COVID in employees' preferred languages and allowing flexibility when using sick days, vacation days, or unpaid leave to accommodate medical visits related to persistent or new Long COVID symptoms. They should also offer virtual options for accessing support programs to accommodate employees with mobility limitations.

**Support the mental health needs of workers with Long COVID**

Long COVID can significantly impact a person's mental health. People with Long COVID conditions frequently report high rates of anxiety and depression. Employers should make sure employees know about available mental health supports including any Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). They should also train managers on how Long COVID can impact employee mental health. Initiatives to acknowledge Long COVID conditions and destigmatize mental health challenges are particularly important.

Developing a full range of mental health services and supports is important. This may include an expansion of an organization's EAP and mental health benefits and initiating an Employee Resource Group (ERG) specific to mental health. Due to the shortage of mental health counselors, notably in underserved communities, employers should ensure that their workplace programs are accessible and welcoming, especially for employees from underserved communities.

**Promote workplace flexibility and effective accommodation policies**

Given the unpredictable nature of Long COVID symptoms, employers should continue to offer workplace flexibility. This includes remote work options and accommodations to help employees manage their conditions while continuing to contribute effectively in their roles. Employers should consider implementing flexible return-to-office policies that enable workers with Long COVID to gradually transition back to the office as their health improves. They should also support employees with Long COVID if they need to take disability leave to recover.

Policymakers can support these efforts with policy tools. Flexibility in return-to-work policies could enable people with Long COVID to transition in and out of disability leave and eliminate the need for repeated applications. This would allow employees to maintain health benefits and income. There is also a need to address requirements in leave programs (e.g., long-term disability, short-term disability, 

Social Security disability benefits, Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to better support workers with Long COVID and similar conditions that may require reduced work hours and/or periodic leave.

Employer associations also have a role to play in developing resources. These organizations can support employees with Long COVID who continue to work and others who are navigating disability benefits and leave programs. This can be done by developing employer resources that can be disseminated to employees. In both cases, these resources should help workers find resources, connections, and community programs that provide assistance.

National, state, and local business associations can develop resources for small businesses to help accommodate employees with Long COVID. Business association networks can also help employers share industry- and position-specific recommendations for effective accommodations.

As a best practice, employers should consider offering proactive accommodations for employees with Long COVID before the need for formal medical documentation is determined, so employees can manage their conditions and stay at work when possible. While awaiting a formal diagnosis from a licensed medical professional, employees may document limitations they are experiencing as a result of Long COVID. Occupational therapists and vocational rehabilitation (VR) specialists can be valuable resources for employers and employees during the Long COVID accommodation process. If employee accommodation needs change or if new medical information on the employee’s condition becomes available, employers may want to consider if updated disability-related documentation is needed.

Collaborate on ongoing research

Employers, policymakers, health benefits insurers and providers, and researchers will need to collaborate to better understand the long-term effects of Long COVID on the workforce. Together they can develop resources on industry trends in Long COVID-related leave, time off, and flexible work policies. Additional research is needed to know how Long COVID impacts employment outcomes and the experiences, perspectives, and support needs of those affected by Long COVID. This research should also explore the experiences of people with disabilities and members of other underserved communities who have Long COVID.

Conclusion

This is a preliminary snapshot of the evolving long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief offers a baseline of information that will prepare employers to respond to the issue of Long COVID in the workforce. Taking these preliminary steps to promote awareness, address ongoing physical and mental health needs, promote flexibility, and support accommodations will help employers retain valuable talent. Employers who have done this groundwork will also be ready to respond to new challenges that will likely emerge as the COVID-19 virus continues to change and researchers continue to learn more about its effects and impacts.
References


