

Long COVID Briefing for Members

'Long COVID' is the syndrome usually defined as continuing to experience symptoms of the illness for a period of 12 weeks or longer following COVID-19 infection. Symptoms can include:

- ▶ extreme tiredness (fatigue);
- ▶ shortness of breath;
- ▶ chest pain or tightness;
- ▶ problems with memory and concentration ('brain fog');
- ▶ difficulty sleeping (insomnia);
- ▶ heart palpitations;
- ▶ dizziness;
- ▶ pins and needles.

Long COVID symptoms vary significantly both in terms of duration and severity. Some people will find the symptoms to be insignificant, while others will be completely debilitated. Some will recover relatively quickly, whilst others will suffer more than a year after the initial infection. Some find that the symptoms are constant, while others find that they vary from day to day.

Estimates around the prevalence of a Long COVID vary, but it appears that around 25-50% of people infected with COVID-19 will experience Long COVID. The risk appears to increase with age, and women are more likely to be affected than men. The Office of National Statistics figures also indicate that around 80% of those with Long COVID had no pre-existing health conditions.

There is growing evidence that Long COVID is more likely to occur in individuals who try to 'soldier on' and do not take the time to rest and recover. Members should ensure that where they are diagnosed with COVID-19, they take the necessary period of sick leave rather than attempt to work through the illness.

Further details can be found on the NHS web page 'Long-term effects of coronavirus (Long COVID)' and on the NASUWT website at: www.nasuwt.org.uk/LongCovidGuidance.

Issues around Long COVID

There are a number of issues around Long COVID:

1. Lack of awareness

There is a general lack of awareness of the condition and how it affects people. This includes employers, too, who may not fully understand the implications of the conditions, and individuals, who may be trying to 'soldier on' rather than seeking support.

Some employers have also noted that the numbers of employees who report that they are suffering from Long COVID are significantly fewer than what they are expecting, which could also indicate a lack of awareness and a lack of confidence in seeking assistance. There may also be issues around newly disabled people being unable to navigate through the highly complex system.

2. Lack of statutory protections

Currently, Long COVID is not defined as a disability, so it lacks the same statutory protections that other long-term conditions have.

3. Detrimental treatment

Some employers are responding to Long COVID in an inappropriate way, such as by not accepting the condition as a legitimate illness, accelerating absence management processes, or not applying reasonable adjustments.

4. Ill-health retirement issues

Currently, to access ill-health retirement benefits, evidence of permanent incapacity to teach is required. This is very difficult to establish with Long COVID.

In response, the NASUWT has launched a Long COVID campaign, which aims to:

- ▶ raise awareness of the condition and its impact on teachers;
- ▶ obtain statutory recognition of Long COVID as a disability under the Equality Act/Disability Discrimination Act (Northern Ireland). This will mean sufferers will have statutory protections, such as the right to reasonable adjustments and protection against discrimination;
- ▶ challenge education employers to ensure that teachers who are suffering Long COVID are supported and not treated unfairly, by ensuring sufferers have access to decent sickness absence provision, recognition of Long COVID as an illness, and reasonable adjustments at work including rights to time off, extended phased returns and access to flexible working;
- ▶ address the inadequacy of Teachers' Pension Schemes by calling for an additional form of ill-health retirement option based on an incapacity for a fixed period of time;
- ▶ secure financial compensation for teachers who have contracted COVID-19 as a direct result of their work (as happens in the NHS).

How can members support the campaign?

There are a number of actions members can take to support the campaign:

1. share the NASUWT's social media posts;
2. write to your elected MP using the model letter on the website available at: www.nasuwt.org.uk/LongCovidEmailCampaign;
3. look for updates on the website.

The TUC has also launched a petition which can be found at: https://www.megaphone.org.uk/petitions/treat-long-covid-as-a-disability?source=twitter-share-button&utm_source=twitter&share=26246026-32a1-4295-9253-5fd31af52fde.

In addition, the NASUWT is seeking case studies from members who are/have been suffering from Long COVID and wish to share their stories. Any members who wish to do so can email campaigns@mail.nasuwt.org.uk.

Campaign Pack