



Returning to work with Long Covid

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Overview

Long Covid and Employment

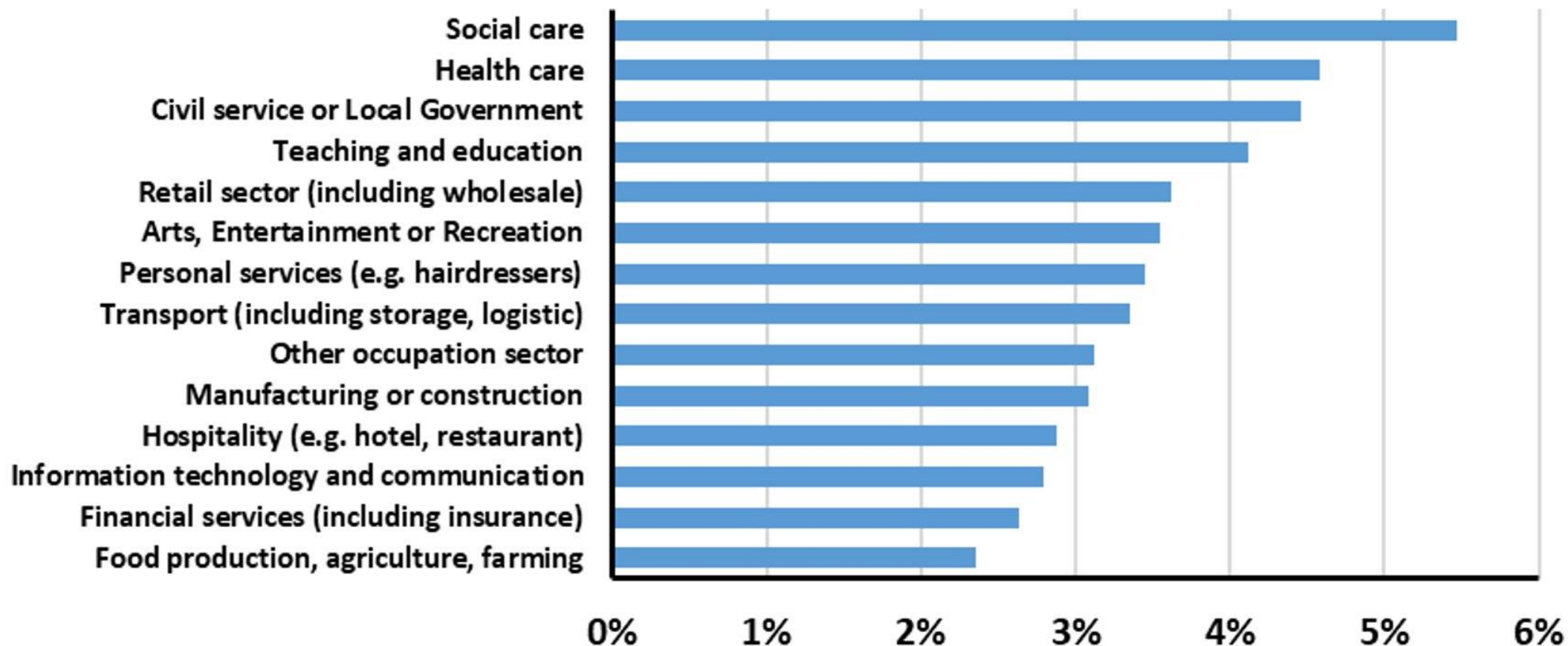
- Impact on healthcare workers
- Research findings
- Legislation

Returning to Work

- Best practice
- Planning for a return to work
- Reasonable adjustments
- Avoiding reinfections

Questions and Discussion

People Living with Self-Reported Long Covid for at least 12 weeks By Job Sector in the UK: collected Nov 7 - Dec 4, 2022





Long Covid and employment: What the research says

- **Physical and Cognitive Limitations** – Persistent fatigue, brain fog, chronic pain, and worsening symptoms after exertion make it difficult for individuals to sustain their usual work routines or perform demanding tasks.
- **Reduced Working Hours or Job Loss** – Many people with Long Covid are unable to work full-time, with some forced to reduce hours or leave employment entirely due to ongoing health struggles.
- **Need for Workplace Adjustments** – Returning to work often requires phased reintegration, flexible schedules, and job modifications to accommodate reduced capacity and prevent symptom flare-ups.
- **Financial Hardship** – Lost income, inability to work, and reliance on disability benefits create financial insecurity, impacting daily living and long-term financial stability.
- **Emotional and Psychological Strain** – Struggling with work limitations, job loss, or the fear of losing employment contributes to stress, anxiety, and reduced overall well-being.

Lunt et al 2022, Al-Aly et al 2024, Greenhalgh et al 2024

Long Covid health related problems: Impact on day-to-day function and ability to work

Slide used with thanks to Clare Rayner

Common health related problems	Impact on function
Autonomic Dysfunction <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Orthostatic intolerance- Other – e.g. gut	Prolonged sitting/standing an issue Endurance Concentration
Neuro-cognitive impairment (brain fog)	Safety ; following procedures
Pain	Concentration, comfort, endurance, etc.
On exertion : chest pain, shortness of breath, oxygen desaturation, heart rate	Physical endurance Safety at work
Voice	Telephone/meetings, voice endurance
New allergies	Multiple effects

Cognitive dysfunction (from SOM 2022)

Cognitive effects of Long Covid may not become apparent until return to work.

Cognitive dysfunction is extremely common in people who have prolonged effects from COVID-19.

People whose duties involve safety-critical tasks should receive assessment for cognitive defects which may be subtle.

May impact on fitness to practise.

What does cognitive dysfunction mean in a work setting?



Difficulty coping with noise



Issues with short term memory



Lack of concentration



Can't comprehend long emails/documents



Only able to concentrate on one thing at a time



Don't always hear what people are saying



Poor decision-making



Inability to deal with complex situations

Long Covid as a disability

By law, a **disability** is a physical or mental impairment that has a *long-term and substantial adverse effect* on a person's ability to do normal day-to-day activities.

Long term means either:

- it will affect them or is likely to affect them for at least a year
- it's likely to last for the rest of their life

From: <https://www.acas.org.uk/long-covid/whether-long-covid-is-treated-as-a-disability?fbclid=IwAR0LJLrt68b1Sl24tJ9AP1S1eprfq0h9IU3DkJMPO8G9p13GPwCoGNqsKp0>

What does disability status under the Equality Act mean?

Disability status under the Equality Act affords workers legal protections which require the employer to consider and make reasonable adjustments to your role in addition to not treating you less favourably because of your condition.

It is common for workers with Long Covid to require increased sickness absence tolerances from employers and this is likely to amount to a reasonable adjustment.

In general, the RCN would call for all covid-related absences to be discounted for absence management purposes.

Management of Health and Safety and Work Regulations 1999/ Management of Health and Safety and Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000

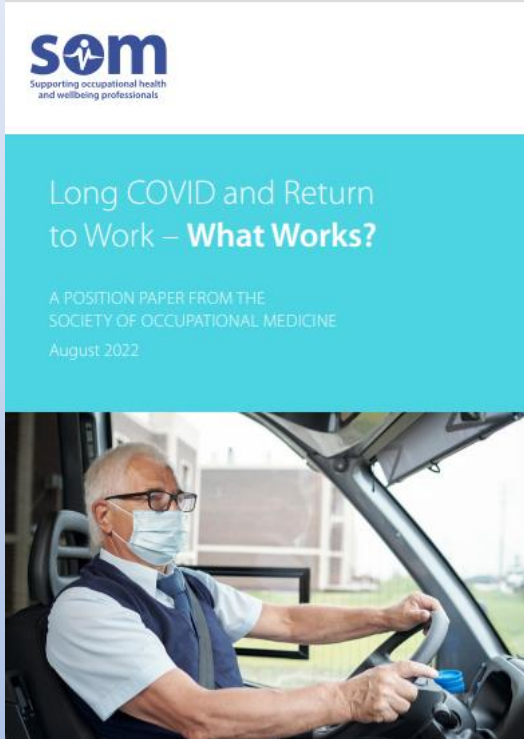
There is a requirement under regulation 3 for all employers to conduct 'suitable and sufficient' assessments of risk to employees to exposures while they are at work.

Members with Long Covid should seek a personal risk assessment to assess the risk created by their symptoms of Long Covid e.g. chronic fatigue.

Once a risk has been identified their employer has a duty to put in place suitable and sufficient control measures.

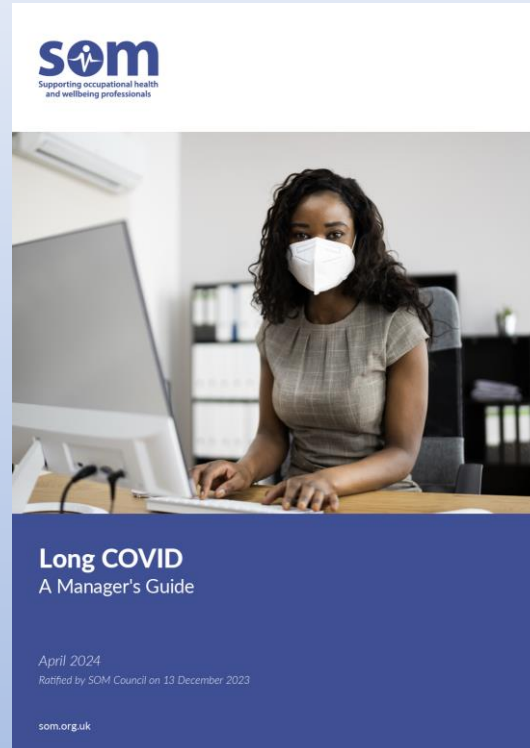
E.g. in the case of chronic fatigue regular breaks, flexible working patterns including shorter days and split shifts.

Supporting staff and colleagues to return to work: Best practice guidelines



Click [here](#)

YouTube video [here](#)



Available [here](#)

[Infographic](#)

[Myth buster](#)



[Advice for members](#)

[Advice for managers](#)

Aiming for 'Sustained Work Ability'

Quantitative/qualitative study

- Common to have multiple unsuccessful attempts at RTW.
- Covid aggravates pre-existing health conditions: at risk of job loss
- People with lack of financial or job security leads to premature return to work.

OBSTACLES to return to daily function and work

- Cognitive impairment - safety
- Interaction of symptoms with job demands
- Being allowed to manage symptoms at work

Recommendations for sustained work ability

- Early supportive contact from **managers** + early pacing advice
- **Prioritisation** of work elements
- Accommodate **multiple health impairments**
- 'Covid-centric' work **policies**

Red flags before return to work

Cardiac impairment

Oxygen desaturation

Critical to establish reason for chest pain, dyspnoea, tachycardia, or hypoxia, ideally before someone returns to work.

Autonomic dysfunction (orthostatic intolerance)

Cognitive Dysfunction – is an assessment needed?

Post-exertional symptom exacerbation (PESE) and returning to work

Post-exertional symptom exacerbation (PESE) and/or flare in symptoms

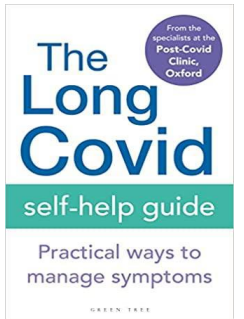
This should be addressed in an individualised RTW plan.

When there is an increase in hours, may feel more tired but should ease off after a while.

If this happens pull back a little, ideally to the level their symptoms were stable.

Managers should allow for this flexibility of self regulation.

Return to work: Things to consider



RETURN TO WORK – THINGS TO CONSIDER

What is your job role	Potential strategies / adjustment to support working
What is your normal pattern of working? (hours, days, shift work)	
Where is your work base? (Home, office based)	
How do you get to work? (walk, bus, train – length of your commute)	
Do you need to travel whilst at work? (Frequency)	
Do you stay in one place during the day or move about a building or several buildings?	
Think about your work environment (open plan, designated work space, no of people within work space, access to toilets, staff rest areas, canteen.	

What are your main work duties?	
What control / flexibility do you have over your work (work autonomously, work under instruction, work to deadlines)?	
Are you responsible for other staff members ?	
Where would you normally go to get support when at work? (another colleague)	
What policies does your workplace have for sickness / return to work?	
Do you have access to Union representation?	

The Smart Return to Work Action Plan

Principles



Co-developed: workers and line managers



Collaborative: worker knows their health and job but will need help



The RTW Action Plan is the most important element of helping people with health problems achieve a timely return to work.

Key aspects

- What can be done, not what can't
- Identify the obstacles to the person's RTW
- Work out the actions that will overcome those obstacles
- Agree a RTW date and timeline for actions (including transitioning back to usual job [or move to different job])
- Agree a review schedule (to allow for revising the Plan)
- Getting back to work with Long Covid is possible but may not be linear



Return to work plan

- Agreed in partnership
 - Employee, union rep, manager, HR
 - Advice from occupational health
- Focus on what you can do
- Very gradual
 - Decreased hours
 - Non-consecutive days
 - Change of role?
- Adjustments in place – e.g.
 - Location – work from home?
 - Allows pacing
- Plan for relapses
 - Sick leave?
 - Annual leave?
- Regular reviews – do I need to step back a stage?
- Annual leave and pay issues



Examples of workplace modifications (reasonable adjustments)

- Respiratory protective equipment for healthcare workers
- Ventilation systems

- Temporary adjustments
- (? temporary redeployment)
- Long-term adjustments
- Permanent redeployment

Altered timing	Starts, finishes, and breaks Travel issues
Altered hours	Shorter, days off between workdays
Altered patterns	Pacing. Regular/additional breaks.
Altered shifts	Consider suspending late/early/night shifts-works when at their best
Workload	Fewer tasks than normal within a timeframe More time to complete tasks Not being required to work to tight deadlines
Altered tasks	Temporary changes to duties or tasks
Support	Clear line of help Someone to ask or check with –‘buddy’ system Time off for appointments Not working in isolation ‘Phone a friend’ peer support
Location	Working from home Near a toilet
Aids	Voice recognition software, remote meeting software
Physical modifications	Advice and assessment should be taken from relevant occupational and workplace professionals.

Fighting for reasonable adjustments in the NHS

Extended phased return not on offer

- Only offered standard 4 week return to work programme
- At least one Trust now only allowing staff with Long Covid two weeks phased return
- Having to use A/L to extend
- Lack of consistency

Unrealistic expectations

- Too many hours, too quickly
- Full time courses within 2 weeks of return
- Not allowed to work from home
- 12 hour shifts and/or working on consecutive days problematic
- May not be fit to work in clinical practice

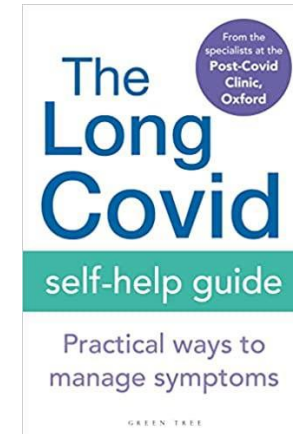
How long should my phased return be?

Small and gentle phased return to work.

With Long Covid the usual phased return of 4-6 weeks is usually over ambitious.

A flexible approach with modest increases works best.

You may need to repeat some weeks before increasing hours and/or days.



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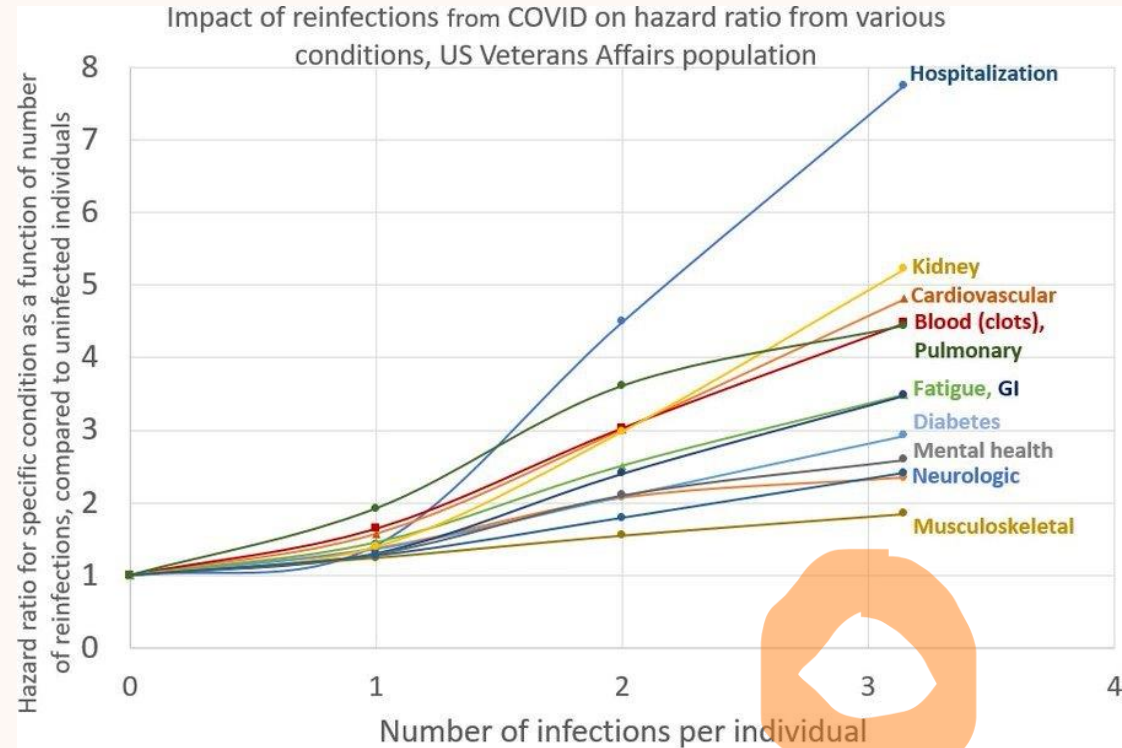
Reinfections-avoid!

Study of millions of people

Significantly ↑

- Death, hospitalisation
- CARDIAC
- VASCULAR
- Prolonged health problems

**Cycle of reinfections-children and families-
is this what we want?**



Source: Bowe, B., Xie, Y. & Al-Aly, Z. Acute and postacute sequelae associated with SARS-CoV-2 reinfection. *Nat Med* **28**, 2398–2405 (2022)

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-022-02051-3>

Employers' obligations under Health & Safety Legislation

- *“Undertake a suitable and sufficient risk assessment proportionate to the risk arising from exposure at work and appropriate to the nature of the work, and this obligation overrides IPC guidance”*. (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/managing/delivering/do/profiling/the-law.htm>)

However

- Many NHS organisations seem to have focused on Government guidelines about PPE requirements & ignored their obligations under Health & Safety Legislation. (See: <https://www.bmj.com/content/375/bmj.n3087>)
- This has resulted in on-going shortcomings in protecting staff at work.

Preventing reinfection

Room ventilation

Ensure proper ventilation in classrooms, canteen and other rooms.

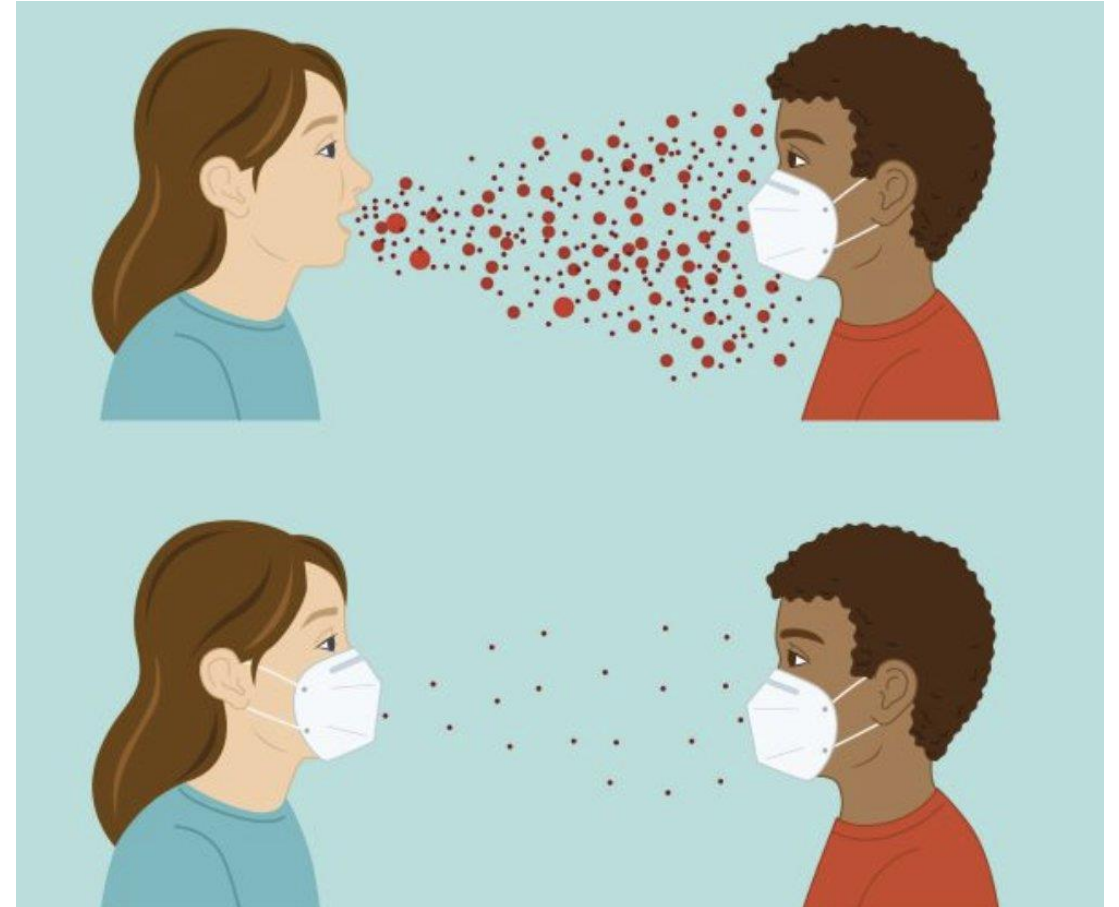


- Provide **natural ventilation** by opening windows and doors when possible and safe.
- When using **mechanical systems** (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), ensure they are serviced regularly.
- When feasible and appropriate, encourage **outdoor activities**.

Updated September 2023

Adapted from materials developed by WHO Regional Office for Europe

#Back2School #SafeSchools #COVID19



Additional tools

Health ability passport

- Recommended by NHS Employers
- RCN guidance available [here](#)



RCN's Respiratory Risk Assessment Toolkit

*Supporting members
to manage the risk of
respiratory infections
at work*

Available by clicking
[here](#)

#SafeAir4All Campaign

Three steps

Step 1: Take photos



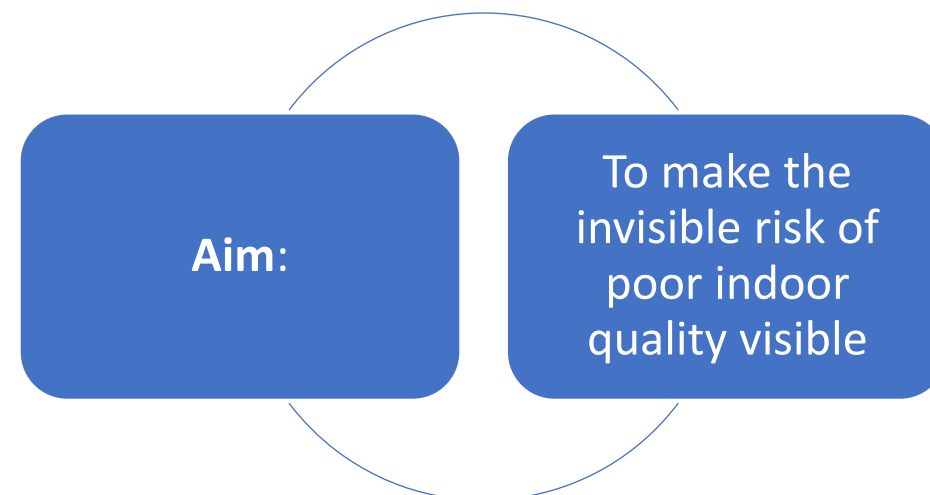
Step 2: Tell us your story



Step 3: Sign the petition



For more information go to: shh-uk.org
or keep an eye out on social media



Questions and Discussion

