

Interim Guidance for Workers on Fitness for Work following COVID-19 Absence

**This guidance is for non-Healthcare workers.
Please refer to any specific guidance that may have been produced for your work sector.**

NOTE: This interim guidance is published in collaboration with the National Standing Oversight Committee (NSOC) on Cases and Outbreaks of COVID-19 in High Risk Workplace Settings. This is interim guidance and it will be reviewed and updated as public health advice and government advice changes. Please refer to <https://gov.ie> for the most current information on government restrictions and keep up to date with public health advice [here](#).

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Introduction

This guide is designed to assist workers returning to the workplace following a COVID-19 related absence having had a confirmed case of COVID-19 (COVID-19 found) or a negative test result: (COVID-19 not detected). Even if your test result is negative, restrictions may still apply. Keeping in contact with your employer is important for planning your safe return to work.

Public health advice has been put in place to guide and support workers to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. COVID-19 can spread rapidly through the workplace causing outbreaks. It is essential that infectious workers must not return to the workplace as they could spread COVID-19 to co-workers and cause an outbreak at work. Healthcare workers seeking guidance on Fitness for Work can access specific advice for that sector [here](#).

What steps should I take?

1. Follow and keep up to date with public health advice. (see link to public health advice on page 1)
2. Maintain communication with your employer throughout a COVID-19 absence from work.
3. Ask your employer for any sick leave policies and procedures that are in place or practical information that may assist and support you, e.g. an employee assistance programme, or information on COVID-19 pandemic-related entitlements.

4. Co-operate with your employer in relation to any fitness for work policies and any procedures for voluntary COVID-19 testing.
5. Inform your employer or occupational health service (where your employer provides this service) if you have any underlying health conditions that places you at higher risk from COVID-19 [here](#). Discuss any individual concerns around fitness for work with your general practitioner (GP) or occupational health (OH) service, on a confidential basis.

Your employer may carry out voluntary mass testing /serial testing in the workplace, depending on the workplace setting or acting upon public health advice / direction. Voluntary mass testing/ serial testing may be required in larger workplaces to prevent outbreaks of COVID-19. A confirmed outbreak will be managed by the local Department of Public Health and may be assisted by an Outbreak Control Team, relevant to the setting. Some employers may introduce Rapid Antigen Diagnostic Testing (RADT) in the workplace to help keep workers safe. (RADTs) are tests that detect the presence or absence of specific antigens or proteins on the surface of the virus. The key reason to use such tests is as an aid to public health in “finding” cases of COVID-19. Workers are asked to cooperate with their employer during testing arrangements. Further information on (RADT) testing can be found [here](#) in section D13.

A. Returning to work following a suspected case of COVID-19 (COVID-19 not detected)

If you have symptoms of COVID-19, self-isolate (stay in your room) at home, and telephone your GP straight away. Your GP will decide if you need a COVID-19 test. If you have a COVID-19 test and the result is negative (COVID-19 not detected), you must restrict your movements (stay at home) until you have not had any symptoms for 48 hours. This is because you may have another infectious illness. You can return to your normal activities once you are 48 hours without symptoms. This includes going to work.

Before you return to work, you are required to:

- confirm to your employer that you are 48 hours without any **symptoms** of COVID-19 (self-declaration).

You may be required to confirm the details of your self-declaration, by obtaining a fitness for work note from your GP or occupational health (OH) practitioner where available.

- complete and submit a **pre-return to work** form to your employer when requested.

You should have an opportunity to discuss your fitness for work with the occupational health service, on a confidential basis, where such a service is available.

When you are back at work, you should:

- follow your employer's instructions around specific COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures, alterations to the layout of the premises or any other changes made to work practices that might affect your safe return to work.
- complete all necessary COVID-19 induction training or any other training deemed necessary by the employer to ensure your safe return to work.
- liaise with the Lead Worker Representative(s) or supervisor if you have any concerns about workplace arrangements.

B. Returning to work following a confirmed case of COVID-19 (COVID-19 found)

If you have been self-isolating at home with a confirmed case of COVID-19 (COVID-19 found), and are now well and returning to work, you must take the following steps.

Before you return to work, you are required to confirm to your employer that you are:

- 10 days after the onset of symptoms (or 10 days from the day of your test if you had no symptoms, or if the test was carried out as part of voluntary serial testing)
- five days fever-free (have not had a high temperature of 38°C (celsius) or above for 5 days before returning). This may be included in the ten-day period.
- You must complete and submit a pre-return to work form to your employer when asked, before the planned return to work date.

Inform your employer if you know of any other circumstances related to COVID-19 that you didn't include in the pre-return to work form, e.g., an underlying health condition or any other reason that may affect your ability to carry out your usual roles and responsibilities.

You may be required to confirm these details by obtaining a fitness for work note from your general practitioner (GP) or occupational health practitioner (OH). Your employer may require you to undergo a medical or return to work assessment to assess your fitness for work where you are absent due to COVID-19 infection.

When you are back at work, you should:

- follow your employer's instructions around specific COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures, or any other changes made to work practices that might affect your safe return to work, e.g. alterations to the layout of the workplace
- complete all necessary COVID-19 induction training or any other training deemed necessary by your employer to ensure your safe return to work
- liaise with the Lead Worker Representative(s) or supervisor if you have any concerns about workplace arrangements for COVID-19.

If you have any concerns around your fitness to return to work, or any other health concerns, consult with your GP or OH practitioner, where available, in confidence.

C. Worker unfit to return to work following a confirmed case of COVID-19

If you are medically unfit to return to work after a period of absence, following a positive test result (COVID-19 found), you should:

- advise your employer as soon as possible that you are unfit to return to work and follow any updated COVID-19 sick leave policies and procedures
- obtain and submit to your employer a note from a general practitioner (GP) or occupational health practitioner (OH) where available, confirming that you are unfit for work until a specified time, giving a description of current symptoms and any factors affecting your safe return to work
- ask your employer for any available organisational supports that may be of assistance during your COVID-19 absence, e.g., an employee assistance programme, information on pandemic related entitlements etc.

If you have any health concern about returning to work following COVID-19 infection, discuss your fitness for work with your GP or occupational health service, where available, on a confidential basis.

If after a specified time, you are medically fit to return to work you will need to make a self-declaration to your employer that you are fit to return to work and agree a timeline for return, follow the steps outlined above for workers returning to work following a confirmed case of COVID-19 (page 5).

If after a medical assessment you are fit for work but unfit to return to your former duties, whether on a temporary or permanent basis, talk to your employer about options for a safe return to the workplace.

Worker who is a Close Contact of a Suspected or Confirmed Case of COVID-19

A close contact can mean:

- a person who has been within 2 meters of a someone who tested positive for COVID-19, for 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period
- living in the same house or shared accommodation as someone who has COVID-19
- sitting within 2 seats of someone who has COVID-19 on public transport or an airplane.

Further information can be found [here](#).

If you come into contact with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19, you may be a close contact.

You'll usually find out if you are a [close contact](#) from:

- a text message from the contact tracing team (HSE)
- the COVID Tracker app
- the public health team investigating confirmed cases within a specific setting, e.g. your workplace.

Close contacts must follow public health advice and guidance, and cooperate with the contact tracing team as required in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

If you have been identified as a close contact of a **suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19, and you are not fully vaccinated**, you must:

- stay at home from work and restrict your movements for 14 days
- inform your employer that you are a close contact of a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19
- get tested for COVID -19 in line with the HSE guidance.

If the suspected case has a **negative (COVID-19 not detected)** test result, then you (the close contact) can return to work once you have no symptoms of COVID-19.

If the suspected case has a **positive (COVID-19 found) test result**, then you (the close contact) need to [get tested for COVID-19](#) and restrict your movement for 14 days even if your test is result is negative. Testing is arranged by the national contact tracing system. Be tested as soon as possible regardless of symptoms.

If you are a **close contact and you are fully vaccinated** you may not need to restrict your movements or have a COVID-19 test if you do not have symptoms of COVID-19 and you:

- are not immunocompromised due to disease or treatment
- are not a cancer patient
- do not have chronic kidney disease.

Worker who is a Close Contact of a Suspected or Confirmed Case of COVID-19 cont'd

If you live with someone who is a close contact of a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 and that person has no symptoms, you do not need to restrict your movements. You can continue to go to work as long as you also have no symptoms. If the close contact develops symptoms, they will need to self-isolate and phone a general practitioner (GP) and be tested. You will then become a close contact if the person you live with tests positive for COVID-19 and at that point you will need to restrict your movements.

As a close contact, you must continue to restrict your movements even if your test result is negative (**COVID-19 not detected**). This is essential as you can become infected up to 14 days after being exposed to the virus. You must do this from when you were last in contact with the infected person. If you're not sure when that was, restrict your movements until the date you are told by contact tracing.

If the close contact had a previous positive COVID-19 test (tested positive more than 2 weeks and less than 6 months ago) and does not now have symptoms of COVID-19, that person does not need to take another test or restrict their movements.

If the close contact, that previously tested positive, has new symptoms, that person must self-isolate and get tested. If the test is negative they can stop restricting their movements once they are 48 hours without symptoms.

A contact tracer will also tell you if you need a second test. If Contact Tracing has not been in contact and you are waiting more than two days, please call the HSE Live COVID-19 helpline at LoCall: 1850 24 1850 (open 8am- 8pm daily).

Restricting your movements means:

- you must NOT go to work
- you should limit your social interactions in so far as possible.
This means staying at home
- you must adhere to national guidance on physical distancing and restricted movement
- you should not use public transport
- you should avoid contact with vulnerable people [here](#)
- you should be contactable by phone at all times
- avoid the use of paracetamol, ibuprofen while undertaking monitoring in case they mask symptoms
- you should always engage in regular hand washing and cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or the bend of your elbow when coughing and sneezing to prevent the spread of infection
- if you live with someone who is restricting their movements, you do not need to restrict your movements as long as they have no symptoms.

These measures must be applied from the last date you were in contact with an infected person.

Worker who is a Close Contact of a Suspected or Confirmed Case of COVID-19 cont'd

You can stop restricting your movements when **both** of the following apply:

- you have a negative test result (COVID-19 not detected) **10 days** after you were last in contact with the person who tested positive
- you do not have any symptoms of COVID-19.

If you are a close contact and have arrived to Ireland from abroad during the pandemic, you need to follow different advice, which can be found [here](#).

Vulnerable Workers

Some people are at greater risk from COVID-19. People at greater risk need to take extra precautions. You can learn more about these [here](#).

Tell your employer if you are at **high risk** or **very high risk (extremely vulnerable)** from COVID-19. Workers in the **high risk category** are advised to work from home, where possible, keep social distance, limit interactions with others and practice good hand hygiene. Follow any sector-specific advice, where provided to you, for workers in the high risk category attending at the workplace.

Workers in the **very high risk (extremely vulnerable)** category are advised to stay at home as much as possible, work from home and avoid physical contact with other people. If you are not able to work from home, you must get medical advice from your GP and/or occupational health (OH) service, where available, before returning to the workplace. Your GP, treating specialist or occupational health (OH) service will confirm your vulnerable status to your employer. Talk to your employer if you are in the high risk or very high risk categories and have concerns about work.

In planning a return to work for workers in the very high risk (extremely vulnerable) category, a fitness for work medical risk assessment should be completed with the worker and Occupational Health practitioner (where available) and/or the worker's medical advisors. You may need to undergo a medical assessment to determine your fitness to return to work (workplace / remote working environment).

Your employer must take account of the following:

- the risk profile of the workplace
- your ability to maintain physical distancing in the workplace
- whether there is a requirement for public facing tasks and/or tasks where you come into contact with others
- whether the tasks involved would expose you to a higher risk of infection

Follow up to date public health advice and the advice of your medical advisors to plan a safe return to work.

If, following a medical assessment, you are **unfit to return to work** (workplace / home working environment), your employer may consider temporary alternative roles until COVID-19 is no longer a risk to your health, where possible.

Data protection (GDPR) and COVID-19

Your employer may need to process your personal data (such as name, address, workplace, travel details) including sensitive data (relating to your health), to protect you and other workers from COVID-19 which is a public health threat and to provide a safe place of work for all workers. The employer should only process the minimum necessary information in line with data protection law.

Employers, who are acting on the guidance or directions of **public health authorities**, are permitted to process personal data, including health data, once suitable safeguards are implemented. Find further information on processing personal and sensitive data in relation to COVID-19 [here](#).

Further Information, Supports and Resources on COVID-19

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are continually developing and this guidance may be updated as necessary. It is important to keep up to date with public health advice.

[Close contact and Casual contact information](#)

[Restricted movements information](#)

[HSA Online Courses - Work Safely Induction, Lead Worker Representative](#)

[HSA Resources for managing health and wellbeing](#)

[Work safely online courses](#)

HSA COVID-19 templates and checklists to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 [Workers Checklist](#)

Returning to work COVID-19 podcasts [here](#).

COVID-19 Advice for employers and workers [here](#).

Work Related Stress – A guide for employers and workers [here](#).