Going to the workplace during coronavirus (COVID-19)

Workplaces are now allowed to open.

The governments of Scotland and Wales have asked people to continue to work from home where possible. In England, the government has recommended a gradual return to workplaces.

Read coronavirus (COVID-19) government advice:


You must check if you need to stay at home (‘self-isolate’) if you or anyone in your household has symptoms or has tested positive for COVID-19.

Find out more about when you must stay at home

As an employer, you might be reopening a workplace that has been closed during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. You might also have staff returning from furlough.

You should consider:

- flexible working arrangements
- making reasonable adjustments
- keeping the workplace safe
- how the workplace might reopen

2. Flexible working

The pandemic has given people experience of working in lots of different ways. Talking to staff can help you gather and use those experiences when considering returning to the workplace.

When planning to return to the workplace, you should consider flexible working arrangements, for example:

- [working from home](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-working-from-home)
- [hybrid working](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-working-from-home)

Find out more about flexible working

Reasonable adjustments

You must consider making reasonable adjustments for disabled employees.
Keeping the workplace safe

Employers and employees who are going to the workplace should:

- follow government advice
- wear face coverings where required (unless exempt)
- social distance where possible
- keep the workplace clean

How the workplace might reopen

Things to discuss and plan for with staff include:

- when the workplace might reopen and staff might return
- if some staff might return before others
- if anyone will stay on furlough

Acas support for employers

An Acas adviser can talk you through:

- your options for returning to the workplace safely
- the steps in the process and a flowchart with links to further resources
- what's a legal requirement and what's good practice
- what support is available for your staff

To arrange an appointment, you can:

- send an enquiry form
- call: 0300 123 1150, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Related content
/working-from-home

If your workplace is open, you should:

- follow government advice
- wear face coverings where required (unless exempt)
- social distance where possible
- keep the workplace clean and well ventilated

You must check if you need to stay at home ('self-isolate') if you or anyone in your household has symptoms or has tested positive for COVID-19.
Find out more about when you must stay at home

3. Follow workplace safety guidelines

To keep the workplace safe, employers and staff must follow the government guidelines for their type of work:

- Scotland – [Scottish Government guidance for safer workplaces](https://www.gov.scot)
- Wales – [Welsh Government workplace guidance](https://gov.wales)

What employers must do

By law, employers have a 'duty of care' for staff, customers and anyone else who visits the workplace.

Employers must:

- do all they reasonably can to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of people at work
- complete a risk assessment, and take reasonable steps to prevent harm
- consult staff on any decisions that involve health and safety

Employers and employees also have responsibilities for health, safety and wellbeing when staff are working remotely, for example working from home.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provides advice on:

- employer's responsibilities
- working safely during COVID-19
- risk assessments

Face coverings and masks

Employers should follow government advice on face coverings and discuss requirements with staff. In Scotland and Wales, face coverings are required in most workplaces, unless people are exempt.

Read the government advice:

- England – [face coverings on GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)
- Scotland – [Scottish Government guidance on face coverings](https://www.gov.scot)
- Wales – [Welsh Government guidance on face coverings](https://gov.wales)

Social distancing at work

Social distancing means keeping people apart to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

If this is not possible, the employer should consider extra changes to keep people safe. This might include:
• working side by side instead of face to face
• using screens or barriers to separate people

Cleaning and ventilation

Everyone should:

• wash their hands or use hand sanitiser regularly
• regularly clean surfaces, particularly surfaces that people touch often

Employers should follow government advice on hygiene and cleaning the workplace:

• England – cleaning in non-healthcare settings outside the home on GOV.UK
• Scotland – Scottish Government guidance on safer businesses and workplaces
• Wales – Welsh Government guidance on how to minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19 in workplaces

Employers must make sure the workplace has an adequate supply of fresh air (ventilation). Find out more about ventilation and air conditioning during COVID-19, from the Health and Safety Executive.

Employers should encourage staff to talk to them about any concerns they have, and try to resolve them together.

4. Consulting staff

Employers should consult with staff about any changes to how they work.

This means the employer should:

• ask staff for their views
• consider any suggestions
• try to reach agreement

Where they have them, employers should also consult their trade union or other employee representatives. They should check if there’s any agreement with representatives that says they must formally consult.

Things to talk about could include:

• how health and safety is being reviewed and managed – employers should share their latest risk assessment
• any changes that could make the workplace safer, for example additional handwashing facilities, giving people different start and finish times to avoid overcrowding or floor markings to help people stay apart
• any other flexible working arrangements, including working from home and hybrid working

Employers can find guidance on talking with workers about preventing COVID-19 from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Changes that might affect someone's employment contract

If there are any proposed changes that affect the written terms of someone’s contract, the employer must consult with them or their representative, for example their trade union representative.

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5. If someone does not want to go to the workplace

Some example people might not want to go to the workplace, or might not be able to.

For example, this might be because they’re:

- worried about catching COVID-19
- at high risk if they catch COVID-19
- caring for children
- pregnant
- living with someone who has been advised to stay at home by their doctor because they have a serious health condition

The employer should:

- listen to any concerns staff may have
- take steps to keep everyone safe at work
- reassure staff by telling them how the workplace has been made safe
- consider flexible working arrangements, including working from home and hybrid working

As well as following working safely guidelines, ways to help keep people safe could include:

- extra car parking where possible so they can avoid using public transport
- different working hours temporarily to avoid peak times

Find out more about keeping the workplace safe during COVID-19

If someone refuses to go to work after all reasonable options have been considered, the employer could start a disciplinary procedure.

If someone believes their workplace is not safe

People legally classed as employees are protected by law from being dismissed or experiencing any ‘detriment’ if they:

- reasonably believe being at work or doing certain tasks would put them in serious and imminent danger
- take reasonable steps over a health and safety issue, for example complaining about unsafe working conditions
- inform their employer about their health and safety issue in an appropriate way

A dismissal in these circumstances could be classed as an automatically unfair dismissal.

Detriment means treatment that leaves someone worse off, for example:

- their employer reduces their hours
- they experience bullying or harassment
• their employer turns down their training requests without good reason

People legally classed as workers also have protection from experiencing any ‘detriment’ if they:

• reasonably believe being at work or doing certain tasks would put them in serious and imminent danger
• take reasonable steps over a health and safety issue
• inform their employer about their health and safety issue in an appropriate way

If an employee or worker refuses to work because they reasonably believe that the working environment is not safe and they’re then treated less fairly by the employer as a direct result, they could make a claim to an employment tribunal.

What an employee can do

If someone is worried about going to the workplace, they should speak with their employer or manager.

Employers and managers should take any issues raised by staff seriously.

Find out more about:

• how to raise a problem at work
• dealing with a problem raised by an employee

An employee could also make a flexible working request:

• making a flexible working request
• responding to a flexible working request

Related content
/working-from-home

People who are at high risk of serious illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) must follow the same guidance as everyone else and think particularly carefully about additional precautions they might wish to take.

People at high risk will have been identified and contacted by the NHS. They may be referred to as being 'clinically extremely vulnerable'.

Their employer must also take extra steps to keep them safe, for example by:

• looking at ways to support their work, for example allowing them to work from home where possible
• providing extra safety measures at their workplace

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published guidance on protecting vulnerable workers, including advice for employers and employees on how to talk about reducing risks in the workplace.

6. If someone's been shielding

People at high risk may have been shielding during the COVID-19 pandemic. This means they will have stayed at home rather than go out to work.

The government stopped advising people to shield in April 2021, but those at high risk should still take extra steps to stay safe.
Check the latest government guidelines for:

- England – [shielding and protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable from COVID-19 on GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)
- Scotland – [Scottish Government shielding advice and support](https://www.gov.scot)
- Wales – [Welsh Government guidance on shielding extremely vulnerable people](https://www.gov.wales)

### When someone at high risk returns to work

If working from home is not possible and the workplace is open, the person at high risk and their employer should talk as early as possible about:

- how and when they’ll [return to the workplace](https://www.gov.uk)
- what the employer has done to [keep the workplace safe](https://www.gov.uk)
- any [concerns the person has about going to work](https://www.gov.uk)
- any [reasonable adjustments](https://www.gov.uk) they might need if someone has a disability
- other flexible working arrangements, including [hybrid working](https://www.gov.uk)

### If a doctor says someone should stay at home

A doctor may still advise someone who’s at high risk to stay at home, even though shielding has stopped. For this situation, check your organisation's:

- [sickness absence policy](https://www.gov.uk)
- [sick pay rules](https://www.gov.uk)

The employer should talk with them to understand the issue and see how they can support them. The employer should also consider if they can continue or start [working from home](https://www.gov.uk).

### If an employee lives with someone who's at high risk

In England, employers can still consider working from home for people who live with someone who's at high risk. People who live in Scotland and Wales should continue to work from home where possible.

If you live with someone at high risk and have any concerns, you should talk with your employer.

You must check if you need to stay at home ('self-isolate') if you or anyone in your household has symptoms or has tested positive for COVID-19.

Find out more about when you must stay at home

### 7. If someone comes to work with COVID-19

If someone finds out they've tested positive or has COVID-19 symptoms when they're at their workplace, they should:

- tell their employer immediately and go home to self-isolate
- avoid touching anything, and wash their hands regularly
• cough or sneeze into a tissue and put it in a bin, or if they do not have tissues, cough and sneeze into the crook of their elbow
• use a separate bathroom from others, if possible
• avoid using public transport to travel home, if possible

What other staff should do

If someone at work tests positive for COVID-19, employers should check the latest self-isolation rules to see if other staff who had close contact with them need to self-isolate.

Follow government guidelines for self-isolating:

- England – stay at home guidance on GOV.UK
- Scotland – Scottish Government Test and Protect self-isolation guidance
- Wales – Welsh Government self-isolation guidance

Staff may be concerned that they've worked with someone with COVID-19. The employer can reassure them by making clear what measures they've taken to keep the workplace safe.

Staff should speak to their employer if they have any concerns or are unsure about whether they need to self-isolate.

Related content
Self-isolation for coronavirus

When someone has been off sick with coronavirus (COVID-19) and is ready to go back to work, they should talk with their employer as early as possible.

They could discuss:

- how and when they’ll return, or if they need a phased return
- any concerns they have about returning to work
- how the employer is keeping the workplace safe
- if an occupational health assessment could help

The effects of COVID-19 are still being understood and the person might experience long COVID. People with long COVID might need ongoing support and further sick leave after they've returned to work.

Find out more about long COVID.

8. If other staff have concerns

Other staff might be worried about being exposed to the virus if someone who’s had COVID-19 or has long COVID comes back to the workplace.

The employer should:

- reassure staff by making clear how they're keeping the workplace safe
- keep communication open but check first with the person who’s had COVID-19 about any details they want kept confidential
- encourage an inclusive working environment