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TRUST

# RETURNING TO WORK FOLLOWING SEPSIS

How to support your employees return to work after sepsis.

**This booklet is a simple guide to good practice, your employees' rights and your responsibilities as an employer. It is not a substitute for legal advice. If you need more details or legal advice, please contact a solicitor. While we aim to provide accurate and relevant information, UK Sepsis Trust will not accept any liability for the use, or inability to use any information in this book.**

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# INTRODUCTION

Your employee's experience of sepsis may affect them physically and emotionally for some time after they've been assessed as fit to return to work. It doesn't matter how old they are or how healthy or active they were before their illness. They have been very ill and have been confronted with a life-threatening illness - it will take some time for them to recover.

We've created this booklet to help you understand sepsis, some of the things your employee has experienced and how to help with their recovery. It can also help you to support an employee whose close relative has been affected.

By supporting employees so they can return to work when they are ready, you can:

- Help managers support their teams more effectively, building trust and loyalty with employees
- Retain knowledge and experience
- Enhance your reputation as a good employer
- Reduce replacement, recruitment and induction costs, plus the associated management time.

## INTRODUCTION

Not everyone recovering from sepsis will need extra support in the workplace, and many of those who do will only require small changes, termed 'reasonable adjustments', to continue working. Try to remember that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to managing recovery in the workplace. The support your employee will need, if any, will be individual to them.

It's impossible to predict the symptoms someone will have, or how they will affect them. Some of the more commonly experienced problems include fatigue, breathlessness, memory and concentration problems, muscle weakness and anxiety.

Some problems are invisible, so you may not be able to see how your employee is affected.

By establishing an open dialogue with your employee, you can find out what support they need, and ask them any questions you may have. As the effects of sepsis often change over time, it is good to have regular chats about how things are going and whether they need extra or different support.

## WHAT IS SEPSIS?

Sepsis is a life-threatening condition that arises when the body's response to an infection injures its own tissues and organs. Sepsis can lead to shock, multiple organ failure and death especially if not recognised early and treated promptly. It's estimated that as many as 245,000 people develop this condition each year in the UK.

As humans we come into contact with many pathogens, or 'bugs', during our lifetime, some of which cause infections. Our body's natural defense systems and immunity fight these infections, frequently without any need to visit the GP or hospital.

Sepsis can occur when the body's immune system – which normally helps us fight infection – overreacts, causing damage to tissues and organs.

The reasons why some people develop sepsis as a consequence of an infection are not entirely understood – medical research institutions are working to understand this better. It's important to note that it's not possible to catch sepsis or pass it onto others.

Not every infection will cause someone to develop sepsis, however almost any infection can trigger sepsis – that's why awareness is so important.

Some people who develop sepsis will be treated on a general ward but some can become incredibly unwell and develop septic shock requiring an admission to Critical Care.

## WHAT IS SEPSIS?

The medical and insurance definitions of a critical illness differ. From a medical perspective, if your employee has had a critical illness, they will have been in hospital and received treatment in a Critical Care Unit, a general term which includes Intensive Care Units and High Dependency Unit (these units are often combined).

## WHAT IS CRITICAL CARE?

Critical care involves very close monitoring and treatment to support one or more organs which are beginning to fail. This could be the lungs (breathing), heart and circulation (blood pressure or heart rate) or kidneys (not passing urine).

The most unwell patients are treated in Critical Care, where:

- They can be carefully watched and monitored, including checking their pulse, blood pressure, breathing rate, oxygen levels, how much liquid they take in and how much they urinate. These checks help staff to quickly identify any deterioration in their condition and change their treatment as needed
- Staff can give them treatment including support for major organs, like the heart, kidneys and lungs
- There are highly trained doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, pharmacists and nutritionists who look after and support relatives by explaining what is happening
- There may be one nurse looking after only one or two patients

## **HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE YOUR EMPLOYEE TO RECOVER?**

Around 40% of people who experience sepsis encounter new physical, cognitive, and/or emotional problems during their recovery. It's normal to go through a period of recovery and lots of people do make a full recovery without any ongoing limitations.

## **SOME IMPORTANT POINTS TO CONSIDER**

- Recovery time varies for each person. Generally it can take weeks to months, but sometimes longer. Some people have few or no problems following sepsis
- Age, medical history, genetics and length of hospital stay can influence recovery
- For people who have suffered significant organ damage, recovery can take more time and be complex, often involving ongoing treatment. If they have suffered organ damage and/or had an amputation, further specific information should have been provided to your employee by their healthcare providers



## **WHAT YOUR EMPLOYEE MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED WHILST IN HOSPITAL WITH SEPSIS**

Some patients have no memory of their time in hospital or have very confused memories of what happened to them.

They may have:

- Felt slightly aware but didn't know where they were or what was happening
- Had nightmares or thought things were happening which weren't real – and these can be very frightening. They may not have realised they were in hospital, and their mind may have tried to make sense of what was happening, for example by making them think things such as they had been kidnapped or were being held captive. Experiencing this confusion and hallucinating is called delirium and is very common
- Been unable to talk or let people know how they were feeling
- Have found it very difficult to sleep or have had strange dreams when they did sleep
- Not know what time of day it was, or how long they had been in hospital

Not remembering what happened is extremely common and can make moving forward difficult. Sometimes people are happy not to remember very much, but for others, this can be upsetting. It may be that they are only ready to find out more in the weeks, months and sometimes years after getting home. It may be that they just want to put it behind them.

## HOW YOUR EMPLOYEE MAY BE FEELING

Here are some common problems your employee may experience during recovery:

### Physical and cognitive

- Fatigue
- Problems sleeping
- Brittle hair and hair loss
- Joint pains and muscle weakness
- Nausea
- Breathlessness
- Poor appetite
- Change in vision and hearing
- Reduced kidney function
- Higher risk of reinfection
- Short term memory loss
- Judgement and decision-making
- Speech, for example finding the right words
- Loss of concentration
- Difficulty performing tasks that were previously simple

### Psychological and emotional

- Low mood and/or mood swings
- Lack of interest in things they previously enjoyed and possibly their personal appearance
- Anxiety about becoming unwell again
- Loss of confidence
- Wondering 'what if I hadn't survived?', as well as feeling guilty that they did
- Feeling guilty about what they put their friends and family through
- Flashbacks and nightmares
- Frustrated that nobody understands
- Strain on personal relationships

## HOW YOUR EMPLOYEE MAY BE FEELING

During recovery, your employee may experience some or all the symptoms listed, and they may also look relatively well. It may have been some time since their illness and many people will expect that they should be better now. This can make recovery a very lonely place for someone who is experiencing these symptoms, and some can even start to doubt themselves and wonder if they are imagining all their problems.

It is often a combination of issues that conspire to make returning to work difficult. For example someone experiencing fatigue, anxiety and trouble concentrating would find most work challenging.

In some cases, a person who has been affected by sepsis can feel obliged to give up their job because their symptoms are so severe or make it impossible to work. The effects of treatment might leave them feeling unable to work. Others may resign because their self-esteem or confidence has been damaged and no support is in place.

### **You don't need to be a medical expert to provide support**

As a manager, you may be one of your employee's most important sources of support. You don't need to be a medical expert, but a basic understanding of their illness, the treatment received and what they have been through can help you fulfill that role. This knowledge will allow you to plan and recognise issues that may emerge at work.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY EMPLOYEE RECOVER?

There are a number of things you can do to help your employee during their recovery period.

Once an opportunity to return to work has been identified, supporting your employee who is recovering is not expensive. Your employee may need some changes to their workspace or to their daily routine, but many such changes cost little or nothing. They can be as simple as moving their work station to a location with a more suitable ambient temperature, allowing an extended lunch break or enabling them to start or finish half an hour later to avoid commuting during the rush hour. These changes are known as 'reasonable adjustments'.

If your employee needs specialist equipment or adaptations to existing equipment, you may be able to get help to cover the costs from the Access to Work scheme. There are details of this in the resources section at the end of this booklet.

Find out what your employee needs. The process and pace of recovery from sepsis differs from person to person, so the support your employee will need depends on how their illness has affected them, the job they do, and their own abilities and coping strategies.

### **Talking can help**

Talking to your employee needs to be more than a one-off chat. Keeping a conversation going is the best way for both you and your employee to express concerns, determine what they need from you and how you can help.

Try to foster a relationship in which they feel they can trust you. For example, you could arrange a monthly meeting - separate from their performance review - to talk about how their recovery is progressing and whether any reasonable adjustments you have agreed on are working for them.

## **WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY EMPLOYEE RECOVER?**

### **Avoid making assumptions or comparisons**

Try not to make assumptions about what your employee can and cannot do. They might be able to continue doing their job as usual, without any additional support.

If you know someone else who has had a similar illness, resist making comparisons between your employee and the other person's recovery. Everyone is different and such comparisons can be unhelpful.

### **Recovering employees need time**

Whilst your instinct might be to show sympathy, an emotional response isn't helpful. It's better to focus instead on the support you can offer your employee. Don't pressure your employee into making decisions about changes to any aspect of their job, particularly if their sepsis was recent. Give them time to process their situation and think through their options.

Your company may already have policies in place that say how you should support your employee and advise how to record any discussion you have with your employee about their recovery.

## THE ROLE OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

If your organisation has access to an occupational health service, then they will be invaluable in supporting the process of returning to work.

Most occupational health professionals serve in an advisory role for managers and employees. Occupational health advice can help you understand your responsibilities and advise on:

- Reasonable workplace adjustments
- Recruitment
- Return-to-work
- Ongoing employment
- Release of company benefits such as pension
- Fitness for return-to-work after sickness absence
- Where there is a management concern about the health and safety or performance of affected employees
- Consideration of alternative employment within your organisation

## YOUR LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES

According to the Equality Act 2010, employers must consider making 'reasonable adjustments' to any policies or practices which cause disadvantage to people with disabilities, including the employer's premises. Examples of adjustments commonly required by people following critical illness may include:

- Alteration to working hours
- Phased return
- Flexible working (e.g. start/finish times, particularly during acute episodes; working from home where appropriate, part time working, job sharing)
- Changing tasks or the pace of work to avoid exacerbating the condition
- Allowing for reasonable time off for appointments and treatment
- Changing layout of workspace (e.g. desk)
- More frequent and/or longer breaks
- Providing a quiet place for an employee to rest without being disturbed.

You will find further information and links to support on your legal obligations in the resources section of this booklet (please see overleaf).

# FURTHER RESOURCES

## **UK Sepsis Trust**

For more information and support relating to sepsis, severe infection and critical illness, visit [sepsistrust.org/get-support/](https://sepsistrust.org/get-support/), or phone our Support Nurses on **0808 800 0029** (UK number).

Here are some other useful links:

### **Access to work**

[gov.uk/access-to-work](https://gov.uk/access-to-work)

### **Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) Helpline**

0845 747 4747

[acas.org.uk](https://acas.org.uk)

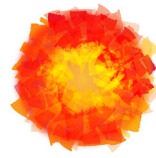
### **CIPD The professional body for human resource and people development**

[cipd.co.uk](https://cipd.co.uk)

### **Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)**

[citizensadvice.org.uk](https://citizensadvice.org.uk)





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