



# Support at work for people with ME

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# Introduction

This resource gives an overview and/or links to further guidance on:

- reasonable adjustments
- occupational health
- support from a specialist clinician
- Access to Work
- returning to work after sickness absence.

For more information about your employment rights and support at work in England, Wales and Scotland, contact the [Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service](#).

The [Labour Relations Agency](#) provides services for employment relations and practices in Northern Ireland.

## Reasonable adjustments

Employers have a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 (see p 5) to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace or working practices so that employees with ME are not placed at a disadvantage.

Our [‘The rights of people with ME at work’ resource](#) covers everything you’ll need about this topic.

## Occupational health

Some employers will refer employees to their occupational health provider for advice regarding reasonable adjustments.

This may mean attending a telephone or face to face appointment with a health professional who has specific training and experience in health and work matters.

They will assess your health and work and how these impact upon each other.

It is advisable to go prepared to the appointment, with any ideas you have about what can help or hinder you (in terms of work and managing your health and recovery).

The occupational health professional will usually be asked by your employer to produce a report summarising your condition, their prognosis (likely timescale for your return to work and/or how much work you can tolerate) and their recommended actions, including effective adjustments that they would consider to be reasonable.

Usually, you would expect any medical information to be kept confidential between you and your health professional, so employees are usually asked to give signed consent to this information being communicated to their employer.

This might happen at the point of referral to occupational health, or when you first started working for the employer, or it may not have been formally requested at all.

You have a right to see the report before it is sent to your employer, and to request changes to any facts which you believe are incorrect or have been misrepresented (but you do not have a right to request changes to professional opinions that are given).

If you would like to do this then make it clear during your Occupational Health appointment.

If you have been off sick from work for more than four weeks (or are likely to be) then your employer or GP can refer you to Fit for Work for a voluntary occupational health assessment.

## Support from a specialist clinician

The [2021 NICE guideline for ME](#) says (section 1.9) that health professionals should “Offer to liaise on the [patient’s] behalf (with their informed consent) with employers, education providers and support services. Give them information about ME/CFS and discuss the person’s care and support plan and any adjustments needed.”

If you are a patient at a specialist NHS ME service, or are seeing another relevant healthcare professional, you may be able to discuss your work-related aspirations and challenges with them.

They may be able to write a letter to your employer, including their professional opinion and advice on what will help you to return to or sustain work.

# Access to work

Advice and financial help may be available to you through [Access to Work](#).

This UK government programme provides practical advice and financial support to help overcome the barriers to work experienced by disabled people and people who have long term health conditions.

You don't need to know exactly what Access to Work might fund for you as the process of applying will determine that, but you do need to make the application yourself as it will be in your name, not your employer's.

The support you get will depend on your needs. Through Access to Work, you can apply for:

- a grant to help pay for practical support with your work
- support with managing your mental health at work
- money to pay for communication support at job interviews.

Access to Work could give you a grant to help pay for things like:

- specialist equipment and assistive software
- support workers, like a BSL interpreter, a job coach or a travel buddy
- costs of travelling to work, if you cannot use public transport
- adaptations to your vehicle so you can get to work
- physical changes to your workplace.

Your workplace can include your home if you work from there some or all of the time. It does not matter how much you earn.

If you get an Access to Work grant, it will not affect any other benefits you get and you will not have to pay it back.

You or your employer may need to pay some costs up front and claim them back later.

# Returning to work after sickness absence

While off sick from work and experiencing difficult symptoms, it can be hard to imagine how returning to work could happen.

If you are thinking about how it could be best managed or if you have already agreed a date to return, a good return-to-work plan is essential.

A clear, carefully thought-out plan that has been agreed by everyone involved will help you and your employer to feel more confident that it can be successful.

This is far preferable than going back to work and hoping it will be okay.

A good return-to-work plan will include consideration of all the following:

- a phased return-to-work period (see below)
- reasonable adjustments with regular reviews (see above)
- Access to Work (see above).

## A phased return-to-work period

An ME-appropriate phased return to work is a commonly used approach to supporting employees who have been off sick from work.

It is a period over which you build up your working hours, towards your fully contracted number, while receiving your full salary.

Many employers initially propose a period of gradually increasing hours of around six weeks.

However, returning to work after a period of absence due to ME may require a much more gradual approach to be successful and sustainable.

Planning to return to work should be a process of making informed decisions, based on what is right for you as an individual – and not a “one size fits all” policy.

It may be helpful to discuss your phased return with your specialist ME clinician, occupational health provider or GP.



**Registered office:**

Action for ME  
Unit 2.2 Streamline  
436-441 Paintworks  
Bristol, BS4 3AS




**Telephone:** 0117 927 9551

**Info & Support:** [infosupport@actionforme.org.uk](mailto:infosupport@actionforme.org.uk)

**Fundraising:** [fundraising@actionforme.org.uk](mailto:fundraising@actionforme.org.uk)

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