

December 2021

Dear Employer

We remain grateful to you, as an employer, for your work in supporting staff at highest risk of complications, severe illness and death from Covid-19 throughout the pandemic and are asking for your ongoing help to enable vulnerable staff keep safe.

In response to the highly transmissible new Omicron variant, the UK and devolved governments have re-introduced advice to work from home wherever possible. Additional measures and the acceleration of the booster vaccine programme have been introduced in an effort to curb rapidly rising case numbers.

Against this backdrop and uncertainty about the Omicron variant, we are urging employers to do all they can to **enable your employees at highest risk from Covid-19 to work from home to reduce their risk of contracting Covid**. To **protect those who cannot work from home, strict adherence by employers to risk reducing measures** (set out in [working safely guidance](#)) remains as important as ever.

We know many employers support their employees at highest risk to work from home or, if this is not possible, to make adjustments that reduce risk. We do however hear from people that do not feel safe at work. We are also aware that many people may not be aware of the potential for reduced vaccine protection among individuals who are immunosuppressed. As charities supporting higher risk individuals, we are keen to work with employers to ensure that people are supported to continue in their employment, without increasing their risk from Covid-19.

### **Individuals who may have reduced protection from vaccination**

Studies<sup>1</sup> have found a lower antibody response to the Covid vaccine among a significant proportion of people who have a weakened immune response due to a health condition or because they receive certain treatments. In response, the Government have offered a 3<sup>rd</sup> dose and now a 4<sup>th</sup> booster dose to this group, to try to increase their levels of protection against Covid. However, the roll out of these vaccine top ups has been [problematic](#) and studies show that even after a third dose it is most likely that some individuals in this group will continue to be at higher risk from Covid-19. People who are immunosuppressed now make up a [greater proportion of those admitted to intensive care](#) with Covid than earlier in the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Octave Study](#)

<sup>2</sup> Please note that all data we have is based on outcomes from the Delta variant, there is uncertainty regarding the Omicron variant, but great caution is recommended.

Government already advises people at highest risk from Covid (previously called Clinically Extremely Vulnerable) to seek guidance from their doctors on their ongoing risk and for employers to take account of this medical advice. We — as patient organisations — also provide Covid-19 vaccine information on our websites, which we keep updated with the latest information, including on vaccine effectiveness. We invite you to make maximum use of these resources, and to signpost them to your staff. We hope that these resources will be useful to you in underpinning joint decision making about working arrangements. We set out some of our key recommendations below:

### **Keeping your workforce safe**

We are very keen to support you as employers so that people who are at highest risk from Covid-19 are reassured their continuing risks are acknowledged and addressed. There is useful guidance on supporting people who may be more at risk from Covid-19 within the wider [HSE guidance](#). HSE have reassured us that they are aware and understanding of the concerns of highest risk people in the workplace and recommend that conversations continue between employer and their employees who are at highest risk about what steps they have taken. We highlight the following key points:

#### Enable working from home wherever possible

- As you will be aware the UK and devolved governments state that people who can work from home should do so. We urge employers to do everything they can to enable people to do so. Where they cannot work from home, strict adherence to Covid safe guidance is vital to safeguard people who are at highest risk from the virus.

#### Risk assessments

- Comprehensive and individualised [risk assessments](#), informed by medical advice where appropriate, which are monitored and adjusted in light of changes such as fluctuating local prevalence, new variants of concern and data about vaccine protection. Assessments for people with fluctuating long-term conditions will also need review in response to changes in health or medication. The [Covid-age calculator](#) is a helpful tool for risk assessments that takes into account health conditions and other factors to estimate vulnerability.
- [Specialist risk tools](#) for specific conditions are available to clinicians to inform their medical advice on individual risk to employees, for example the UK Kidney Association risk grid for Kidney Disease.

#### Safety best practice

- Emphasising to the [wider workforce](#) the importance of continuing to stringently apply Covid-19 safety measures and reminding them of the shared responsibility to reduce everyone's risk from Covid, particularly those most at risk.
- Supporting regular lateral flow testing for the virus to keep everyone protected.
- Ensuring [good ventilation](#) throughout the workplace.

- Considering continuing requirements for facemasks and measures to enable greater social distancing (eg limiting numbers) in indoor and more crowded areas.

#### Reasonable adjustments

- Discussing and implementing reasonable adjustments such as working from home wherever possible, or if not flexible start times to avoid peak time travel on public transport, or moving away from public facing roles. Funding for adjustments may be available from [Access to Work](#) scheme, which will prioritise applications for people at highest risk.

Individuals will have different views on what feels right for them, and some of your staff may have very legitimate concerns about their own ongoing risks from Covid-19. We hope this will be discussed during the risk assessment process and have significant bearing on decision making.

#### **Mental wellbeing support**

We would also like to underline the potential mental health needs of staff at higher risk. Living with the threat of serious illness or death should they contract Covid-19, in many cases shielding for over a year, and the ongoing uncertainty has placed a huge toll on the mental health of individuals more at risk from the virus. Our websites provide links to support for people affected by long term conditions and once again we encourage you to signpost your staff to these as relevant; they are included at the bottom of the letter.

We recognise the huge amount of work done by employers throughout the pandemic and would like to thank you again for the ongoing support made available to vulnerable staff and their families.

We remain ready and willing to provide any support, guidance and information that may be helpful as you continue to support your workforce through what has been an extraordinarily challenging time.

Yours faithfully,

Paul Bristow, Chief Executive, Kidney Care UK  
Gemma Peters, Chief Executive, Blood Cancer UK  
Charlotte Augst, Chief Executive, National Voices  
Genevieve Edwards, Chief Executive Officer, Bowel Cancer UK  
Clare Jacklin, Chief Executive, National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society  
Nick Moberly, Chief Executive, MS Society  
Tess Harris, Chief Executive, PKD Charity  
Henny Braund MBE, Chief Executive, Anthony Nolan  
Sue Brown, Chief Executive, Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance  
Stevie Tyler, Chief Executive Officer, The Aplastic Anaemia Trust

Georgina Carr, Chief Executive, Neurological Alliance  
Dr Susan Walsh, Chief Executive, Immunodeficiency UK  
Catherine Woodhead, Chief Executive Officer, Muscular Dystrophy UK  
Andrea Brown, Chief Executive Officer, National Kidney Federation  
Peter Tichbon, Executive Chairperson, SarcoidosisUK  
David Ramsden, Chief Executive, Cystic Fibrosis Trust  
Alison Railton, Head of Policy, Kidney Research UK  
Bridget Turner, Director of Policy, Campaigns and Improvement, Diabetes UK  
Kim Chaplain, Associate Director for Work, Centre for Ageing Better  
Ellen Miller, Chief Executive Officer, Versus Arthritis  
Sue Farrington, Chief Executive, Scleroderma and Raynaud's UK

### **Covid-19 information:**

#### **Anthony Nolan**

[anthonyolan.org/patients-and-families/understanding-stem-cell-transplants/coronavirus-covid-19-and-your-stem-cell](https://anthonyolan.org/patients-and-families/understanding-stem-cell-transplants/coronavirus-covid-19-and-your-stem-cell)

#### **Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance**

[arma.uk.net/covid-19-coronavirus-info/](https://arma.uk.net/covid-19-coronavirus-info/)

#### **Blood Cancer UK**

[bloodcancer.org.uk/support-for-you/coronavirus-covid-19/](https://bloodcancer.org.uk/support-for-you/coronavirus-covid-19/)

#### **Bowel Cancer UK**

[bowelcanceruk.org.uk/news-and-blogs/coronavirus-faqs/](https://bowelcanceruk.org.uk/news-and-blogs/coronavirus-faqs/)

#### **Cystic Fibrosis UK**

[cysticfibrosis.org.uk/life-with-cystic-fibrosis/coronavirus](https://cysticfibrosis.org.uk/life-with-cystic-fibrosis/coronavirus)

#### **Diabetes UK**

[diabetes.org.uk/about\\_us/news/coronavirus](https://diabetes.org.uk/about_us/news/coronavirus)

#### **Immunodeficiency UK**

[www.immunodeficiencyuk.org](https://www.immunodeficiencyuk.org)

[immunodeficiencyuk.org/livingwithimmunodeficiency/affectedadultswithpids/helpingpeoplere-turntoworkaftershielding](https://immunodeficiencyuk.org/livingwithimmunodeficiency/affectedadultswithpids/helpingpeoplere-turntoworkaftershielding)

#### **Kidney Care UK**

[www.kidneycareuk.org/coronavirus](https://www.kidneycareuk.org/coronavirus)

#### **Kidney Research UK**

[Coronavirus and kidney disease - Kidney Research UK](https://www.kidneyresearchuk.org/coronavirus-and-kidney-disease)

#### **MS Society**

[mssociety.org.uk/care-and-support/ms-and-coronavirus-care-and-support](https://mssociety.org.uk/care-and-support/ms-and-coronavirus-care-and-support)

#### **Muscular Dystrophy UK**

[muscardystrophyuk.org/get-the-right-care-and-support/coronavirus-information-and-advice-for-people-with-muscle-wasting-conditions/](https://muscardystrophyuk.org/get-the-right-care-and-support/coronavirus-information-and-advice-for-people-with-muscle-wasting-conditions/)

#### **National Kidney Federation**

[www.kidney.org.uk/News/coronavirus-latest-information-and-advice](https://www.kidney.org.uk/News/coronavirus-latest-information-and-advice)

#### **National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society**

[nras.org.uk/information-support/information/coronavirus-and-ra/](https://nras.org.uk/information-support/information/coronavirus-and-ra/)

[www.nras.org.uk/resource/work/](https://www.nras.org.uk/resource/work/)

#### **PKD Charity**

[www.pkdcharity.org.uk/news-events/latest-news/13-covid-19-coronavirus-and-polycystic-kidney-disease-update](http://www.pkdcharity.org.uk/news-events/latest-news/13-covid-19-coronavirus-and-polycystic-kidney-disease-update)

**SarcoidosisUK**

<https://www.sarcoidosisuk.org/coronavirus>

**The Aplastic Anaemia Trust**

[www.theaat.org.uk/listing/?categorytitle=covid-19-guidance](http://www.theaat.org.uk/listing/?categorytitle=covid-19-guidance)

**Versus Arthritis**

[www.versusarthritis.org/covid-19-updates/covid-19-employment-and-work-information/](http://www.versusarthritis.org/covid-19-updates/covid-19-employment-and-work-information/)

**Scleroderma and Raynaud's UK**

[www.sruk.co.uk/find-support/coronavirus/](http://www.sruk.co.uk/find-support/coronavirus/)