COVID-19 has Australians worried about returning to the workplace

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Four in five workers surveyed in an Australian study experienced fears around catching or spreading COVID-19 upon return to their worksite last year, with social and family impacts of abandoning work-from-home

causing concerns for half of workers.

The new research from Monash University's Insurance Health Work Group, part of the School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, was published in *The Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, just as some states emerge from snap lockdowns and Sydney's is extended until local transmission is under control.

The study's findings offer government, industry and employers an opportunity to develop evidence-based support resources and strategies to ease the transition back to worksites.

Participants in the COVID-19 Work and Health Study completed a survey at four timepoints between March and December 2020: with questions focused on changes to work status, financial implications, and mental and physical health.

The latest publication reports on results from the third survey, conducted between July and September 2020, with 86.3 percent reporting at least one concern about their workplace reopening, 82.4 percent with concerns related to infection risk and 53.4 percent reporting concerns related to impact on work and home life.

The most common concerns were getting infected with COVID-19, infecting other people, being able to maintain physical distance from colleagues, and being concerned about work colleagues coming to work when sick.

Parents with dependent children were more worried about getting infected in the workplace, as were healthcare, retail, and Victorian workers generally. The worry of infecting others was less commonly reported by managers and part-time workers.

Workplaces have been a major driver of SARS-CoV-2 transmission throughout the pandemic, with some industries being at greater risk than others. Employers have responded in a number of ways, including facilitating working away from the worksite, or continuing with on-site working under significant modifications.

Now that Australia's vaccination program is underway, many are pinning their hopes on a reduced likelihood of lockdowns in the near future, and returning to worksites.

Study lead and Director of the Insurance Work and Health Research Group Professor Alex Collie says: "It's natural for people to have concerns about returning to workplaces after such upheaval. We expected people to be worried around infection risks in the workplace, but this study shows people are also worried about changes to their life at home, such as spending less time with family, and losing the ability to work from home."

"The study also shows us that everyone's circumstances are unique. Some people have few if any concerns about returning to their usual workplace. It may offer them a sense of separation of work and home, and increased socialization."

Distancing from members of the public was a common concern for workers across industries such as health care, retail, accommodation and food sectors. Distancing from colleagues was a worry of health care workers, people working in education and workers in Victoria generally.

The most common concerns related to work and home life were a reduction in the time spent with family and friends, and concern about how changes in the workplace will impact ability to perform the job role.

18-24 year olds were more likely to experience a greater number of

concerns, along with retail workers and people experiencing psychological distress or financial stress. People exclusively working from home had more concerns than those still working in their usual workplace, or those working at their workplace and home, or those employed but not currently working.

Professor Collie says: "These results show the need for targeted strategies to allay a broad range of concerns, experienced differently throughout the workforce. Effective communication about improved infection control practices at worksites will be vital for employers. They may need to invest in programs to identify and further support employees experiencing psychological distress and mental health issues."

"Where possible, impacts on home and family life should be considered. For parents with dependent children, maintaining flexibility around the working location into the future may provide a gentler, more manageable transition back to the workplace."

More information: Daniel Griffiths et al, Returning to the Workplace During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Concerns of Australian Workers, *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation* (2021). DOI: 10.1007/s10926-021-09990-7

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