

Returning to work after SCAD

Returning to work after a SCAD can be very daunting and you'll no doubt have lots of questions! These might include:

- How soon can you go back to work?
- When will you know if you're ready?
- What will you be able to do workwise?
- What happens if you struggle with the hours?
- What support can your employer provide?

Things to consider

When you're thinking about returning to work there will be a number of factors to consider, including:

- The type of role you do:** For example, if you work in a physical/manual role you may decide you need to take longer off work to adequately recover so you can manage the physical demands of your role when you do return. If, however, you work in a home-based role, you may feel more comfortable returning to work earlier.
- Whether you are employed or self-employed:** People who are self-employed may have a financial need to return to work earlier than someone in an employed role, or this may allow you more flexibility.
- Length of time in your current role:** If you recently started in a new role prior to your SCAD you may feel more pressured to return to work sooner than if you have been in a role for several years and are well established.
- Ongoing symptoms:** Post-SCAD patients can experience an array of different symptoms and recovery timeframes can vary hugely from person to person. How your symptoms impact you on a day-to-day basis can have a huge impact on your decision to return to work or not.
- Your relationship with your employer:** The support you receive from your employer may have a real impact on your ability to return to work within a certain timeframe.

How do you start the process of returning to work?

It may first be helpful to have a discussion with your healthcare provider (ie GP or Cardiologist) about any restrictions they may recommend when returning to work.

For example, if your role involves physical activity, ask them to [review this information about exercise and physical activity for SCAD patients](#).

Additionally, it is also worth taking into account any ongoing treatment you may have, such as weekly cardiac rehab sessions or appointments and you may wish to complete these before returning to work.

Questions for your GP/healthcare provider

- When can I consider returning to work? You will need to give them a clear overview of what your role entails so they can properly assess this.

- Do I need to be aware of any restrictions with lifting/carrying etc?
- Can I expect to have any further medical appointments (reviews/scans etc) and when? These can then be factored into your return to work plan.
- Can you provide me with a fit note to give to my employer?

Talking to your employer

Once you have a timeframe in mind for returning to work that you feel comfortable with it is a good idea to speak with your employer. This could be your direct line manager or HR depending on your employer's processes.

The following are things you may wish to consider discussing with them prior to agreeing a return to work date.

- Can they accommodate a phased return to work plan (also known as a Graded Return to Work plan/GRTW)?
- Over what period of time can this be completed? eg 4 weeks/6 weeks etc.
- What adjustments, if any, can be made to your role?
- Are there any alternative duties you can do when you first return to work? This may be especially important if you work in a manual role.
- Can the phased return to work plan have regular review points built in? This usually consists of a meeting with your line manager to discuss how things are going. Weekly catch-ups can be ideal when you first return to work.
- Do you need to see an occupational health advisor or have a risk assessment completed before you return to work?

Phased return to work plans

Your employer may have an occupational health team they can use to help support your return to work and devise a return to work plan. If not, the following is worth considering when discussing hours/duties etc for your return to work.

- Where possible, consider starting back on reduced hours and days to allow you to gradually increase your tolerance to work over time. For example, you may return on 3 alternate days per week (Mon, Wed & Fri), working half days initially and gradually increase either the number of hours on those days or the number of days per week.
- Where possible (and at least for the first couple of weeks) try to factor in rest days in between your working hours. This will allow you to rest sufficiently in preparation for your next working day.
- Try to build in a review with your line manager/employer during your return to work. This may consist of a quick

catch-up with your line manager every week and then a more formal review with HR after a few weeks. This is a good opportunity to discuss how you're finding the hours/duties you are completing and to discuss any changes that may need to be made.

- ❑ Where possible avoid working nights/evenings/weekends (or any time when there is less managerial support) upon your initial return to work. You may need to return to shift work straight away, but try to complete days rather than nights initially if this can be accommodated.
- ❑ Make a note of upcoming appointments so these can be factored into your return to work plan.

Returning to a self-employed role

Returning to work in a self-employed capacity can pose its own challenges – while it may provide you with more flexibility in terms of the number of hours/days you do initially, there is often a lack of support and a financial incentive to return to full hours as soon as possible.

Here are some points you may wish to consider when returning to work on a self-employed basis.

- ❑ Be realistic about the number of hours/days you can complete when you first start back and, if you can, try to phase these up gradually. You may find it helpful to write yourself a return to work plan (see right) to help guide you.
- ❑ Where possible, avoid shift work (nights etc) initially upon your return to work to ensure you are not overly tired and try to build in rest days or half days initially if your workload will allow.
- ❑ If you have staff within your company, try to delegate work tasks and ensure they are aware of when you will be in work so this can be managed effectively.
- ❑ Consider updating your customers (if appropriate) to manage their expectations – you will likely find that most are very understanding.
- ❑ Think about whether you can get support from family/friends to help keep you on track with your return to work plan and not put too much pressure on yourself to return to full-time too soon.

Other things to consider

- ❑ Your work tasks should reflect the number of hours you are working and should be realistic for the amount of time you are there.
- ❑ Work targets should also be adjusted for the hours you are working.
- ❑ If your role involves heavy lifting is there any equipment that can be used to remove this from your role, such as mechanical lifting devices/hoists etc?
- ❑ If you have to commute for work, consider adjusting your start/finish times to accommodate this.
- ❑ Where is your work space located? Do you have to access it via stairs etc? If this would currently be difficult for you, could you work in a different location or from home initially?
- ❑ Ideally your return to work plan should be flexible to allow you to increase your hours sooner if you feel able or reduce them if you feel it's a bit too much.
- ❑ Be aware that you will likely be tired upon your initial return to work, even if you are working reduced hours/

days. It's always best to err on the side of caution when agreeing your hours (even if it doesn't look like a lot!) so it feels manageable and is sustainable for you.

Strategies to consider upon return to work

- ❑ **Stress management:** It is worth considering how you will manage the more stressful elements of your role. As SCAD patients we all need to try and avoid excessive stress as much as possible, so discuss this with your line manager and highlight any potential concerns or issues you have and how these may be best managed.
- ❑ **Colleagues' & customers' expectations:** When returning to work on reduced hours it can be easy to get swept back into your full day-to-day role and often colleagues or customers can forget you've been unwell and that you're working reduced hours. It can be helpful to use your out-of-office and voicemail message to let people know you are currently working reduced hours and will get back to them when you are able to. You may find it helpful to update this as your hours change so colleagues/customers etc can know when to expect a response.

Example Return to Work plan

Someone who usually works Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm in a sedentary (office-based) role may wish to consider the following plan:

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
Week 1	3 hours	Off	3 hours	Off	3 hours
Week 2	4.5 hours	Off	4.5 hours	Off	4.5 hours
Week 3	5.5 hours	Off	5.5 hours	Off	5.5 hours
Week 4	7 hours	Off	7 hours	Off	7 hours
Week 5	7 hours	7 hours	Off	7 hours	7 hours
Week 6	8 hours	8 hours	8 hours	8 hours	8 hours

This plan should include regular reviews with your line manager where possible (for example, every Friday morning) and should also allow for rest breaks as you need (these should be in addition to your lunch breaks when you're working longer hours). Usually a 5-10 minute break every hour is suitable during the first few weeks.

NB: The above is just an example – you may need to increase your hours over a longer period of time (ie 8-12 weeks) depending on your symptoms and your role, or you may feel more able to complete your return to work over 4 weeks (especially if you work part-time hours).

If you work shifts you may wish to consider increasing your hours per day initially before increasing the number of days per week. For example:

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
Week 1	Off	3 hours	Off	3 hours	Off
Week 2	Off	5 hours	Off	5 hours	Off
Week 3	Off	7 hours	Off	7 hours	Off

This can then be increased to a full shift (ie 12 hours) but with fewer days and then gradually increase hours on additional days over a period of time. It may be best to speak to your employer about how this might best be done to ensure you have the right support in place and that your employer can accommodate this.

Your employer's role

How your employer will handle your return to work will depend on the culture of your organisation. This can vary depending on factors including size, sector, employee demographic, your job status and role, work location, management style and so on.

It's very difficult to provide tailored guidance on employer expectations that suits everyone after SCAD, but there are some general points your HR team or manager will want to cover and will likely be reviewing. They will want to know how your SCAD (and any other health issues) is likely to impact the role you do, in the short and long term, what they need to do in helping you return and whether they can make those adjustments.

HR has a dual role – to minimise risk to the company and to look after your wellbeing/treat you fairly, so they do have responsibilities.

- They must follow their own policies and procedures.
- If an employee has been off for a long time (usually considered to be more than 28 days), the employer should consider changes so that employee can return to work.
- They should consider:
 - part-time or flexible working, even if for a short period of time,
 - if alternative work is suitable or available.
- They should explore options with a GP and the business.
- They should obtain a medical report from your GP or occupational health professional to understand causes of absence and whether any adjustments would help.

Your employer will require your written consent to collect medical information about your condition and any actions they need to consider when planning your return (whether from a GP or occupational health). You don't have to agree to this, but you should consider whether this information might be helpful to all parties.

An employer is not prevented from dismissing an employee due to absence, but they will need to be mindful of the risks they take in doing so, especially if they have not sought any medical reports.

Your employer should look at your whole employment history, discuss reasons for your absence, the impact on the rest of the workforce and the ability of the business to function. They aren't expected to create a special job for you, but they are expected to seriously consider where you could play a part. They should consider the operation of the business, your job status (both financially and within the structure), your skills and any training needed.

If you don't think this has been given serious consideration you can ask to see evidence of meetings or discussions that took place. You should always ask for copies of written notes taken in meetings you attend and a written copy of outcomes reached.

You're entitled to be accompanied in any meetings that could result in a formal outcome – warnings or dismissal.

Please don't feel embarrassed or worried about taking someone into such a meeting with you. It is always a good idea and many employers prefer employees to be accompanied. Many employers will accept you being accompanied at any meeting. If it is not offered, ask, especially if you are feeling stressed or anxious about the meeting.

What if a return to work is not possible?

Where all reasonable efforts to return to work have drawn a blank and your employer cannot accommodate any adjustments for valid business reasons, your employer can inform you of the likelihood of dismissal. A fair process must be followed and you must be given your contractual notice and holiday pay. You should be notified of your right to appeal and how to go about starting that process.

If you have exhausted the appeal process but still feel you have been unfairly dismissed (having been employed for more than two years or discriminated against because of a '[protected characteristic](#)'), then you could consider pursuing a claim via an Employment Tribunal. ACAS (see links below) can offer advice and guidance.

Some employers may be open to entering a 'settlement agreement' with you. This is a voluntary agreement reached between employer and employee, outside of any disciplinary or performance management process, usually with a sum of money paid to the employee that brings the employment relationship to an end. They are often used in situations where an employer and employee feel their relationship is no longer working and a 'clean break' is the best way forward.

REMEMBER, you are an asset to your employer!

The sooner you are back and working at your full potential the better for your employer. You're the best at being you. **Building your strength back up can be a more sensible strategy than going straight back to work.** Recruiting and training a new employee is costly – often thousands of pounds. This, along with the lost productivity waiting for a new employee to get up to speed, will mean it's much more effective for your employer to support you in returning if they can.

Below are some organisations and sites that may help you, but it is also worth finding out if your employer offers an Employee Assistance Programme. This is usually a confidential and free helpline that offers advice to employees. Some offer legal or counselling support too.

Useful links

[Mind](#) | [ACAS](#) | [ACAS: reasonable adjustments](#) | [ACAS: returning to work/phased return](#) | [Citizen's Advice](#) | [UK Government](#) | [Claire Morris](#) | [Harriet Mulvaney on returning to work](#)

This information has been produced in partnership with SCAD patients Claire Morris and Harriet Mulvaney.

Claire is a Registered Nurse who has worked within the rehabilitation industry since 2005. She specialises in assisting people to return to work after illness or injury and in co-ordinating their rehabilitation to maximise their recovery ([clairemorrisrtw.com](#)).

At the time of her SCAD, Harriet was a busy HR Director so was able to use that experience and knowledge when she was considering returning to work after her SCAD. [Watch her discuss this here.](#)