

Managing short-term sickness absence

From persistent short-term absences to long-term illness - here's how to get on top of sickness absences and get your people back to their best selves.





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With everything that's happened in the last few years, it's no surprise that you may have already come across a rise in sickness and absenteeism in your business.

It's no secret: sickness absence can end up being a real headache for an employer. But it also can be a smooth process - you just have to have the right policies and procedures in place. So, here's the lowdown on everything sickness absence - from return-to-work interviews to your absence process.

Nail down your absence management process

Establishing a fair and consistent process for absences is one way to help identify repeat offenders, as well as deter other employees from not turning up to work. For the majority of employees, this process directly influences their decision "to attend or not to attend" work. As part of your absence policy, you should define the process both employees and employers should follow:

- 1** Set out the time period employees have to inform their manager of their incapacity to work. Some employers request this one day before, others say within one hour of the employee's normal start time – it's up to you.
- 2** We'd recommend you request your employees to call in sick over the phone. If they're unable to do so themselves, someone needs to do it on their behalf. When the employee reports in, ask them what type of illness they have and what their predicted return date is.
- 3** When the employee returns to work, conduct a back to work interview – regardless of how long they've been off for. Back to work interviews can act as a deterrent, in that employees will be less likely to take time off if they have to formally sit and chat about the reason of absence.

Are your employees aware of their actions?

- Make it known that you actively record and monitor absences.
- Follow a fair procedure and, where appropriate, take disciplinary action against those employees who fall short of the attendance standards.
- Ensure that employees are aware of the impact of their absence, both on customers or clients, and on their work colleagues.
- Treat employees in the same way as you would expect to be treated.

With this process, you need to be able to respond flexibly to a particular individual's circumstances (e.g. 10 years' service with no absence, but this year they're having a spate of bad health). You also need to take into account any potential 'discrimination' issues connected with the absences.



Fit notes

If an employee is off sick for up to seven days, they can self-certify their sickness. For any period of absence that exceeds seven days, a fit note from their GP will be required. If the fit note states the employee is OK to work, then no further action is required.

If the fit note states the employee can gradually return to work or return with lighter duties, if practically possible, you should accommodate this. If this isn't something you're able to work around, then the employee should stay off work and your normal sick rules would still apply.

If an employee's absence goes beyond 7 days and they fail to provide you with a fit note covering their continued absence, it could result in Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) not being paid for that continuing period of absence.

Return to work interviews

If possible, you should arrange the return to work interview to take place on the employee's first day back. The interview should be conducted by anyone with the authority to do so - like their line manager or a HR professional. During the interview, you should ask the employee the following questions:

- What illness caused them to take time off work?
- Did they see a GP?
- Did they receive any treatment or medication(s)?
- Did they follow the correct absence reporting procedure

You should then address any attendance problems and/or conspicuous absence patterns and once the interview has finished, you should then document everything that has been discussed in writing.

Pay

Employees who are off work due to sickness for four or more executive days in a row are entitled to SSP. They may receive more depending on your company sick pay scheme - if you have one. And remember, all qualifying employees are eligible for SSP from day one of their employment with you.

Managing short-term sickness

We've all experienced it one time or another during our working life - "I'm not feeling too good today, can I be bothered to go to work or not?" and levels of short-term absence in a business depend on each individual's answer to this question.

With some employees, an employer can never do enough to get them to choose the first option. In these cases, all you can do is monitor the absences, record the details, hold return to work interviews, and when the absence level becomes unsatisfactory, take disciplinary action.

Remember

This same monitoring, recording, return to work contact, and formal action process is still necessary in all cases of unplanned absence.



Managing long-term sickness

Long-term sickness absence can also affect the business and knowing when to take action or decide that the employment can no longer continue is a fine balancing act.

Once an employee has run out of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), it is seen as an easy option to just ignore them on the basis they are unlikely to come back to work but aren't costing the business anything. However, they remain an employee accruing employment rights such as the right to paid holidays, so it's important to take action to identify if and when they are likely to return to work, and if not then when might it be appropriate to terminate their employment. It is also important

to work with the employee to consider whether there are any adjustments that could be made to the working arrangements or role to assist them to return to work, particularly where the employee is classed as disabled.

In such circumstances, you will always be advised that, before any ultimatum can be set on a return to work date or date for dismissal, you will need to have followed a fair procedure. This will include having regular welfare meetings with the employee and being in contact with the employee throughout their absence, not just when their SSP runs out.

