

# Employing people guidebook

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## Manage absence and sickness

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### Subjects covered in this guide

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Introduction

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The need for absence and sickness policies and procedures

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Basic principles of managing absence and sickness

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Measuring and monitoring absence and sickness

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What to include in absence and sickness policies

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Employee absence as a capability issue

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Helplines

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Related guides on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk)

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Related web sites you might find useful

*You can find this guide by navigating to:*

*Home > Employing people > Working time and time off > Manage absence and sickness*

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### Introduction

Good businesses ensure they have appropriate systems in place to manage staff absence. Unexpected absences affect productivity and profits and, if they become a regular occurrence, are likely to lower morale and motivation.

However, you can improve absence rates and minimise the impact of absence by putting effective policies and procedures in place. These should be backed up by pleasant working conditions, active management and good motivation.

Monitoring and investigating the causes of absence can also help you identify factors contributing to absence levels, eg unsafe work practices.

This guide will help you to understand the causes of absence, monitor and measure the effect of absence rates and set up the right policies and procedures to control it.

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### The need for absence and sickness policies and procedures

Absence and sickness policies and procedures should set out clearly how you will deal with and monitor absence/sickness, and detail the rights and obligations of your workers. See the page in this guide on **[measuring and monitoring absence and sickness](#)**.

These will help your workers to recognise that you treat these issues seriously and that they have certain responsibilities to fulfil. They should also help you prevent small problems developing into larger ones

and may assist you in identifying and tackling underlying problems such as poor working conditions, work-life balance issues or lack of adequate training/career development.

You may also find that monitoring reasons for absences makes it easier for you to identify and deal with different types of absence appropriately. For example, you should treat an employee on long-term sick leave or who has a drug/alcohol addiction differently from an employee who regularly calls in sick on a Friday.

See the pages in this guide on [employee illness as a performance issue](#) and on [managing absence problems as disciplinary issues](#).

Reasons for **unauthorised absence** can sometimes be work-related, eg due to bullying or harassment, or external, eg due to marital problems. Work-related reasons could stem from **poor working conditions**. Consider improving them by:

- offering flexible working patterns, training and promotion opportunities, staff incentives etc
- examining job design
- using temporary workers during busy periods
- developing policies and procedures to tackle anti-social behaviour

However, remember that many unauthorised absences are due to unforeseeable sickness or accidents and that you also need to plan for authorised absences resulting from **contractual and legal entitlements** such as holidays or parental leave.

Having absence and sickness policies and procedures in place can bring clear business benefits. These include improved productivity, profit-making and morale, higher retention rates and motivation, as well as lower insurance costs. You may also find that your reputation is improved and that this in turn aids recruitment.

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### Basic principles of managing absence and sickness

There are a number of steps you should take to manage absence and sickness effectively:

- Produce clear **written guidelines** for employees, eg setting out leave entitlements, and procedures for reporting absence.
- Include terms in employees' contracts of employment giving you express permission to hold **absence records**.
- Record accurately and monitor absence.
- Train managers on how to handle absence.
- Set targets for absence levels.
- Conduct **return-to-work interviews** after absences, interviewing sensitively to find out if there are underlying causes, eg domestic problems.
- Provide for **special equipment** if appropriate, eg ergonomic chairs for employees with back problems. For advice, information and possible grants, [read about Access to Work \(AtW\) on the Jobcentre Plus website - Opens in a new window](#).
- Check the attendance records of applicants during recruitment.
- Provide opportunities for discussing

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problems relating to attendance in performance appraisals.

- Develop other initiatives to encourage good attendance, eg improvement of working conditions, introduction of flexible working, provision of counselling and healthcare/prevention facilities.

See the pages in this guide on [what to include in absence and sickness policies](#) and [measuring and monitoring absence and sickness](#).

### Medical reports

You may wish to gain further information on a worker's ill health by obtaining a medical report. However, you will need their permission.

A worker can refuse this request or ask that corrections be made to their report. A GP may also refuse to disclose this information if they believe it will cause serious physical or mental harm to the individual, or reveal the identity of another person.

You can ask a worker to attend an examination with a company doctor or Occupational Health Service if you wish to get a second opinion. They can refuse to do so, but you should inform them in writing that a decision regarding their future will be taken on the basis of the information available and that it could result in dismissal.

When dealing with medical reports, you need to respect individuals' privacy. See our guide on how to [comply with data protection legislation](#).

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### Measuring and monitoring absence and sickness

Setting up procedures for measuring absence and sickness in the workplace allows you to find out:

- how much working time has been lost
- where absence occurs the most, eg among particular types of worker or department
- how often individual employees are absent
- whether there is a pattern of absence, eg where an employee regularly calls in sick on a Friday

You can examine figures on absence and sickness to discover the scale and nature of the problem. It will also show whether the absence is:

- short-term certificated or uncertificated
- long-term sickness
- unauthorised

Use the information collected to see any trends, eg high levels of absence in a department where motivation is a problem, where an employee covering for others is feeling stressed due to heavy workloads, or where someone is being bullied or harassed.

You can then take appropriate action to improve the situation. For instance, if absence is due to **stress**, examine the workload and consider reallocating work. If stress is due to harassment or bullying, consider disciplining the workers responsible. [See a guide on bullying and harassment at work on the Acas website - Opens in a new window.](#)

[Find out about work-related stress on the](#)

### Health & Safety Executive website - Opens in a new window.

Return-to-work interviews can be an effective way of collecting absence data. Carried out sensitively, they can help establish:

- if there is a hidden real reason for a worker's absence, eg workplace bullying or domestic problems
- if they are ready to return

### Legal requirements

Employers are required to keep information on absence and sickness. However, this information is kept for statutory sick pay purposes only and should not contain reasons for absence.

In order to hold more detailed absence records - eg for the purposes of monitoring absence levels - you need employees' permission as this information is **sensitive personal data**. You can achieve this by setting out the policy in the terms and conditions of employment.

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### What to include in absence and sickness policies

Develop your absence and sickness policy/procedures in **consultation** with line managers and employee representatives. If your business recognises a trade union, you should also involve them.

An absence and sickness policy could include the following:

- When time off might be permitted, eg jury service leave and time off for

emergencies involving dependants. See our guide on **allowing time off work**.

- How the worker should notify you if they are ill, late for work, or absent for other reasons.
- When they should submit a self certificate or **medical certificate**. Note that under statutory sick pay rules self certification is only required from the fourth day, and a medical certificate from the eighth day, of an absence.
- Statutory - and any contractual - **sick pay arrangements**. This should also be covered in the written statement of terms and conditions of employment. **Use our interactive tool to create a written statement of employment**.
- Possible procedures for using the employer's own doctor/medical adviser.
- If applicable, the need to attend a **return-to-work interview**.
- Consequences of not complying with the policy, eg when disciplinary measures will be taken.
- Who is responsible for keeping **attendance records**.
- Reference to any other relevant policies, eg alcohol/drug misuse, health and safety, discipline and grievance, annual leave, maternity/adoption/paternity/parental leave.

You may also want to include the following points:

- If you have good reason to believe an employee is abusing the system, you may take disciplinary measures against them.
- While those genuinely absent for illness will be treated

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sympathetically, excessive sickness can result in dismissal after proper procedures have been followed. For information on dealing with employee illness fairly, see the page in this guide on [employee absence as a capability issue](#).

There are other options you may want to consider, including:

- offering a counselling service
- setting up rehabilitation programmes for long-term sickness
- offering attendance bonuses or incentives - make sure these don't discriminate, eg against those who are disabled or pregnant or people working part time or with other flexible working arrangements
- appointing an absence case manager

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### Employee absence as a capability issue

Where an employee genuinely suffers from long-term ill health, or frequent related bouts of short-term sickness which interfere with their job performance, it's best to treat the absence as a capability issue, rather than as misconduct.

Deal with such issues very sensitively and:

- investigate, measure and monitor their absence record
- consult regularly to find out about their health and likelihood of return to work
- set time limits on assessing the situation and tell the employee
- let them know if their job is at risk, and why

- obtain medical reports - you'll need the employee's permission
- consider adjustments to their job to allow them to return to work and/or do their job more easily

To avoid an unfair dismissal claim, only dismiss as a last resort. Make sure you have followed **fair and proper procedures**. See our guides on [handling discipline and grievance issues](#), [dismissal](#) and [when an employee leaves through ill health](#).

Keep in mind the following:

- Check if the illness amounts to a **disability** - if so, you may need to make reasonable adjustments so the employee can carry out their job. For the definition of disability, see our guide on how to [prevent discrimination and value diversity](#).
- Discount any periods of absence related to a pregnancy-related illness when taking action over someone's absence record. For the rights of pregnant employees, see our guide on [maternity, paternity and adoption - an overview](#).
- An eligible employee may be entitled to statutory sick pay for up to 28 weeks - as well as any contractual sick pay. See our guide on [pay - an overview of obligations](#).

### Absence related to drugs and alcohol

Treat employees addicted to drugs or alcohol similarly to employees with any other serious illness. However, if an employee won't accept they have a problem or seek help, the issue may become one of unacceptable conduct.

Where the issue is purely one of conduct, ie

the employee is not addicted to alcohol or drugs but their drug/alcohol consumption is leading to regular absence/lateness, the employee should become subject to the disciplinary procedure.

See the page in this guide on [employee absence as a conduct issue](#).

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### Employee absence as a conduct issue

Where an employee is often absent or late for unexplained/unconvincing reasons, this becomes a conduct issue and you may wish to take disciplinary action.

Be aware though that sickness, domestic problems or travel difficulties leading to absence or lateness may not necessarily amount to misconduct. In cases of genuine sickness, particularly if the sickness is pregnancy related, disciplinary action should not be taken. See our page in this guide on [employee absence as a capability issue](#).

### Investigations before taking disciplinary action

Prior to taking disciplinary action, you could:

- ask absent employees to phone in at a given time each day
- ensure line managers follow up any unexplained absence
- conduct return-to-work interviews

Where employees are finding it difficult to manage home and work responsibilities, consider introducing flexible working arrangements. Note that parents of children under six - or 18 for a disabled child - along with carers of adults have a right to request

flexible working. You must consider such requests seriously - see our guide on the [benefits of flexible working](#).

### Taking disciplinary action

The employee should - except in the most serious of cases - be given an opportunity to improve. Usually warnings, both oral and written, are sufficient.

If the situation does not improve, you may have to consider dismissal, but only as a last resort and after proper and fair procedures have been followed. See our guide on [handling discipline and grievance issues](#).

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### Helplines

#### Acas Helpline

08457 47 47 47

#### National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence

020 7067 5800

#### HMRC Employer Helpline

08457 143 143

#### Equality and Human Rights Commission Helpline - England

0845 604 6610

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[Related guides on businesslink.gov.uk](#)

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Use our interactive tool to find out how to manage new and expectant mothers in your workplace | Use our interactive tool to find out how to manage paternity and adoption leave and pay | Bullying and harassment | Know how much holiday to give your staff | Maternity, paternity and adoption - an overview | Allowing time off work | Set up employment policies for your business | Occupational health and welfare: an overview | Hours, rest breaks and the working week | Meet minimum workplace standards | Handling discipline and grievance issues | Benefits of flexible working | How to deal with stress | Comply with data protection legislation | Use our interactive tool to create a written statement of employment | The employment contract | Prevent discrimination and value diversity | Create and operate a health and safety policy | Smoking policies, drugs and alcohol abuse | Dismissal | When an employee leaves through ill health | Pay - an overview of obligations |

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Related web sites you might find useful

**Download information on long-term absence through ill health from the Acas website (PDF) - Opens in a new window**

**Find out about managing attendance and employee turnover at the Acas website - Opens in a new window**

**Find a toolkit for managing absence and sickness at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development website - Opens in a new window**

**Download a guide to workplace health**

**initiatives and award schemes from the British Heart Foundation website (PDF) - Opens in a new window**

**Find out about AtW at the Jobcentre Plus website - Opens in a new window**

**Download guidance on health and employment from the Acas website (PDF) - Opens in a new window**

**Find guidance for employers on managing sickness and absence and return to work on the Health & Safety Executive website - Opens in a new window**

**Read about managing stress at the workplace at the CIPD website - Opens in a new window**

**Read about methods of analysing and measuring absence on the Acas website - Opens in a new window**

**Read about managing short-term sickness at the Acas website - Opens in a new window**

**See guidance on personnel data and record keeping on the Acas website - Opens in a new window**

**Download information about managing disabled employees in small businesses from the Equality and Human Rights Commission website (PDF) - Opens in a new window**

**Read the code of practice on disability in employment and occupation on the Equality and Human Rights Commission website (PDF) - Opens in a new window**

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**Find out about the Access to Work scheme for disabled people on the Jobcentre Plus website - Opens in a new window**

**Read guidance on how to manage drug and alcohol problems at work on the Health & Safety Executive website - Opens in a new window**

**Download guidance on the statutory disciplinary and grievances procedures from the Acas website (PDF) - Opens in a new window**