

A short guide to managing sickness absence

Information sheet 2

When people are off work with back pain, you can take measures to help them to return to and remain in work. This sheet describes how to do this and complements the advice in the *Stay active* sheet in this pack.

Why should you manage sickness absence and return to work?

High rates of sickness absence can damage your reputation, increase your overheads and affect the health and well-being of your employees. In 2003/4, 4.9 million working days were lost to back pain and the average time off work for someone with back pain was 19 days.

By working with your employees and their representatives, you can:

- retain staff and avoid unnecessary recruitment and training costs;
- keep your business productive and where your sick employee has built up a loyal client base, keep this as a source of income;
- reduce unnecessary overheads, eg saving on lost wages and sick pay costs;
- help meet your legal duties and avoid discriminating against disabled workers;
- maintain and improve workplace relations by working in partnership with employees and their representatives;
- support the recovery and well-being of your employees.

What can be done?

In very small businesses, sickness absence will usually be infrequent. You need to think about how you would treat each case and what support you can give. Larger businesses will generally have more absences, and to



manage these effectively, need a more formal approach. A policy can be a convenient way to achieve this (though this is not a legal requirement).

Consult and listen to your employees. Work with them to gain trust and a common understanding about the following:

- your policy to help return to work following sickness absence;
- roles and responsibilities;
- that return to work benefits everyone;
- what you will do - take a fair and consistent approach to help them return to work;
- the steps employees should take when sickness keeps them off work;
- that you will encourage employees who are suffering from back pain to keep active. See the *Stay active* sheet in this pack for more information;
- how absence will be recorded, monitored and analysed to identify work-related causes;
- where absence is work related, you will look at modified work, including reasonable adjustments, to help return to work.

*Whatever your job,
look after your back*

Timeline with suggested actions

Less than 3 days of sickness absence

- Your employee tells you why they are absent from work.
- When they return to work, welcome them back and have a chat about their absence.
- Discuss any repeated periods of short-term absence - are there any underlying reasons?

Between 4 and 14 days of sickness absence

- Keep in touch with your employee.
- When they return to work, have a return to work interview. This may be a simple welcome back, but you may need to discuss steps to help your employee's performance, which may include adapting the workplace for back pain sufferers, or underlying issues if short-term absence is frequent.

Between 15 and 28 days of sickness absence

- Keep in touch regularly with your employee and identify any obstacles that are preventing their return to work.
- You may need to seek professional advice, eg doctors, occupational health and rehabilitation providers, to help overcome these barriers.
- Welcome your employee back and conduct a return to work interview.
- If it seems your employee is not likely to return to work soon, talk to them about the need to consider a return to work plan.

After 28 days of sickness absence

- Continue to keep in touch regularly with your employee about their absence.
- Put together a return to work plan, including what adjustments will be made to their work, and agree it with your employee and others involved. You may need to seek professional advice in putting together the plan.
- Implement your employee's return to work plan.
- Review your employee's progress until they resume full duties.

Sometimes, even with everybody's best efforts, it is not possible for your employee to return to full or even partial employment, but it is important not to jump to conclusions before alternative solutions have been explored. Consider seeking professional advice before making any decisions. Remember, as an employer, you have legal duties to:

- ensure that the health and safety of everyone at work is protected, so far as is reasonably practicable, including those who return to work with continuing poor health;
- make reasonable adjustments to accommodate employees who are or have become disabled as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act. The fact that the person has a disability does not mean that they represent an additional risk to health and safety;
- take into account your employees' rights under employment law.

Want to know more?

For more information on managing sickness absence, please see the following HSE publications:

Managing sickness absence and return to work: An employer's and manager's guide HSG249 HSE Books 2004 ISBN 0 7176 2882 5

Off work sick and worried about your job? Steps you can take to help your return to work Leaflet INDG397 HSE Books 2004 (single copy free or priced packs of 15 ISBN 0 7176 2915 5) Web version: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg397.pdf

Working together to prevent sickness absence becoming job loss: Practical advice for safety and other trade union representatives Leaflet Web02 HSE 2005 Web only version available at www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web02.pdf

For more information about tackling back pain and the Better Backs campaign, visit: betterbacks.hse.gov.uk or phone HSE's Infoline on: 0845 345 0055

For more information on managing sickness absence, visit: www.hse.gov.uk/sicknessabsence

For more information on involving workers in health and safety management, visit: www.hse.gov.uk/involvement

For free practical advice on health, safety and return to work issues please contact Workplace Health Connect on: 0845 609 6006