

A short guide to managing sickness absence and return to work

Advice for employers

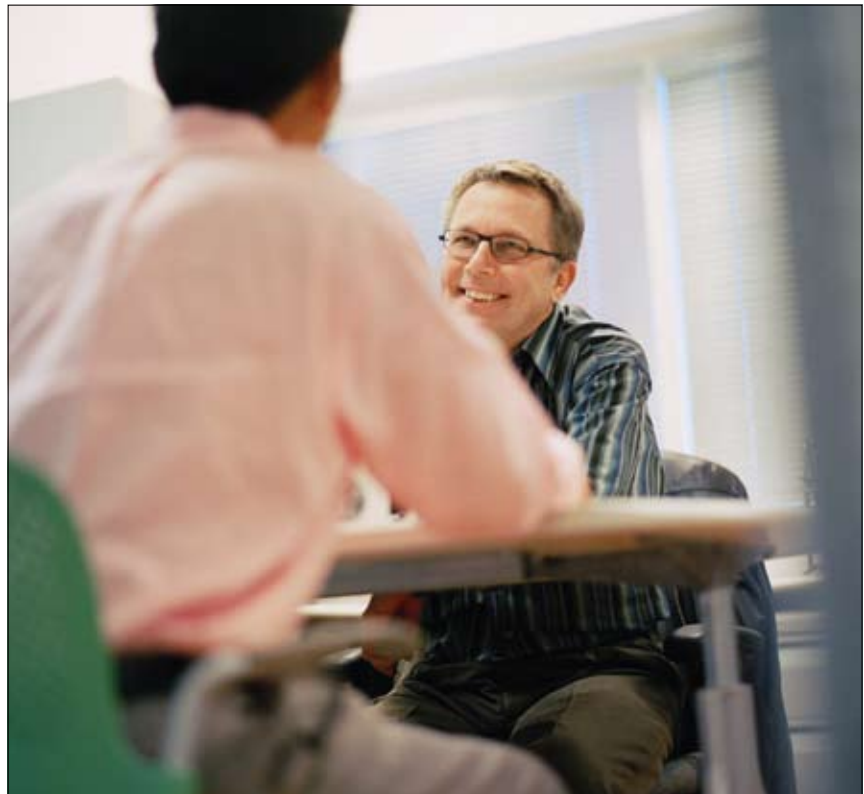
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This sheet gives an overview of what you can do to manage sickness absence and return to work. More specific advice on managing back pain is available on the HSE website at www.hse.gov.uk/msd/backpain.

The benefits from managing sickness absence and return to work

Whether you are a small or large business, high levels of sickness absence can negatively affect your reputation as an employer of choice in your local community and certainly your profit/loss margin. By effectively managing sickness absence and return to work, you can:

- improve the performance of your business;
- keep valued employees;
- help keep your workplace safe and healthy.



Return to work myths

Myth	Reality
You have to be 100% fit before returning to work.	People can, and do work, before they are 100% recovered. Functional ability is regained gradually and being at work can help this.
There is a risk of re-injury by returning to work.	There is no evidence that returning to work early increases the risk of re-injury. In most cases, work can help recovery.
People must be given light duties on their return to work.	Many people can and do return to their original job. Some people might need transitional working arrangements to help them return to full-time working over a set period of time.
You shouldn't contact people off sick.	You need to contact people to help integrate them back into the workplace. This shows your care and concern for your employee's wellbeing, as an employer.

Getting started

Putting organisational arrangements in place for managing sickness absence and return to work does not need to be difficult. There is a well-established body of good practice you can draw on to help you decide what measures are right for a business of your size. Having a policy in place, though not a legal requirement, is a convenient way to set down roles, expectations and procedures so that you, your employees and their representatives have a common understanding about what will happen when someone is on sickness absence. If you have line managers, it is important that you properly train them in carrying out your policy, so they can take

a fair and consistent approach to cases of sickness absence. Review the effectiveness of your policy and consult your employees and their representatives if you need to make changes. **The earlier you intervene to manage sickness absence, the better the chance of a return to work for your employee.**

Suggested timeline and actions for managing sickness absence

Up to 1 week

- Your employee follows your procedures for notifying their absence from work.
- When they return, welcome them back and have a chat about their absence. If there is a continuing pattern of short-term absence, discuss any underlying reasons for this.

2-4 weeks

- Keep in regular touch with your absent employee.
- If they do return within 2 weeks, it is important that you conduct a return to work interview with them. This may be a simple welcome back, but you may need to discuss steps to help improve your employee's performance.
- For those still absent from work, try to explore with them what obstacles are delaying their return to work and how to overcome them. This may include seeking professional advice.
- If your employee is still absent after 3 weeks, at this point you need to start discussions about a return to work plan. This should be in place by week 4 of the absence. Put the plan into action and review your employee's progress as they build up to full-time working in their job.

After 4 weeks

- Continue to keep in regular contact with your employee about their absence.
- If your employee cannot return to their original job, consider other possible alternatives within your organisation and, where appropriate, put a return to work plan in place.

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 other options have been explored. Think about seeking professional advice before making any final 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 defined as disabled under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The fact that a person has a disability does not mean that they represent an additional risk to health and safety.**
- **Comply with employment laws and your employees' rights at work.**

Want to know more?

For information about back pain and other musculoskeletal disorders, visit: hse.gov.uk/msd

For information about the Better Backs campaign, visit: www.hse.gov.uk/msd/campaigns

Or call HSE's Infoline on 0845 345 0055 for further information

For more information on managing sickness absence and return to work, visit www.hse.gov.uk/sicknessabsence

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