

# 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.





# Managing short-term sickness absence

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. Managing short-term sickness is a real challenge for many businesses.

According to the latest [CIPD Health & Wellbeing at Work report](#), UK employees now take 9.4 sick days per year on average. That's the highest level in over 15 years and it's a steep increase from 5.8 days pre-pandemic and 7.8 days in 2023. With absence climbing, the pressure is on to manage short-term illness more strategic than reactive. This guide will help you put the right policies, processes and decisions in place so you keep control.

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 process for managing absences

Establishing a fair and consistent process for absences is one way to help identify repeat offenders, and deter other employees from not turning up to work. For most 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.
- Make sure that employees know about impact of their absence, has 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.



# Supporting staff during and after absence

## 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.

## Remember

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

## Pay and Statutory Sick Pay (SSP)

Employees who are off work due to sickness for four or more consecutive days are entitled to SSP provided they meet eligibility criteria. They may receive more if your company offers an enhanced sick pay scheme. All qualifying employees are entitled to SSP from day one of employment.

Under the Employment Rights Bill, reforms are expected to take effect from April 2026.

The changes will:

- Remove the lower earnings limit, making SSP available to all workers, no matter their income.
- Introduce a new rule so employees on lower wages will receive 80% of their average weekly earnings or the standard SSP rate – whichever is lower.
- Remove the current three-day waiting period, meaning SSP will be payable from the first day of sickness absence.

What can you do now? Review your absence and payroll policies to make sure you're ready for if and when reforms are in place.





## 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.

## Managing long-term sickness

Long-term sickness absence can have a big impact on your business. Knowing when to take action – or when continued employment may no longer be sustainable – can be a fine balancing act.

Once an employee has run out of SSP, keeping in contact may feel like less of a priority, on the basis that they're unlikely to return to work and aren't currently costing the business anything. But they remain an employee and continue to accrue certain employment rights, such as paid holidays. That's why it's important to identify if and when they're likely to return, and if not, when it might be appropriate to consider ending their employment.

It's also important to work closely with the employee to consider whether any reasonable adjustments could support their return – for example, temporary changes to duties or hours, particularly where the employee may be classed as disabled.

Before making any decisions about a return-to-work deadline or potential dismissal, you must have followed a fair and reasonable process. This includes holding regular welfare meetings, keeping in touch throughout the absence (not just once SSP ends), and documenting every step carefully.

# Citation are here for you every step of the way

Managing sickness and absence can be complex, especially with legal changes coming and absence rates rising across UK workplaces. But you don't have to handle it alone.

When you partner with Citation, you get access to 24/7 HR and Employment Law advice, delivered by experts who've guided thousands of UK businesses through HR and Health & Safety issues including absences.

Call our team on **0345 844 1111** to find out how we can help your business manage sickness absence with confidence. Or [get in touch online](#) and we'll set up a time to talk that suits you.