

Briefing on staff absences due to sickness and COVID-19

Introduction and purpose

Employee absences due to sickness can be difficult for businesses to navigate, as you must ensure you are looking after both your staff and your business. This issue has become more prominent since the start of the pandemic, with many people unable to work due to COVID-19.

In fact, it is estimated that in the UK alone, there were 32.5 million working days lost to work-related ill health in 2019/20. This came at a huge cost to employers.

In this document, you will find information and resources to help your business deal with staff absences related to COVID-19.

Please contact the HTA with any questions.

Actions to consider taking

Preparing your business to deal with staff sickness efficiently and sensitively is important. Having a plan and communicating it to employees could help retain staff and prevent operational disruptions. Here are some key actions to consider taking to make sure your business is ready:

- Encourage COVID-19 prevention

The best place to start, when dealing with staff sickness, is with prevention. Encourage employees to take COVID-safety measures whenever possible and ask that on-site staff get tested regularly.

- Communicate your staff absence procedures

Outline processes for what employees should do when experiencing symptoms, how and when to make their line-managers aware of their sickness, and what the return-to-work process will look like. Make sure this is communicated to employees and understood by all.

With some COVID cases, long-term symptoms could occur, so policies should take long-term absences into consideration.

- Implement clear policies

If you haven't yet, decide on a clear and reasonable sickness policy and put it in writing. These should include:

- Self-isolation policies

There is no legal requirement in **England and Northern Ireland** to self-isolate, but government guidance should be followed if someone has tested positive or is displaying symptoms. Current guidance calls for a self-isolation period of 5 days for England and 10 days for Northern Ireland.

However, in **Wales and Scotland**, there is a legal requirement to isolate.

In **Wales**, there is a 5-day isolation period that is required for those who test positive. On day 5, you should begin taking lateral flow tests. If your test on day 5 is negative, remain isolated and test again on day 6. If you receive two negative tests on two days in a row, then you can end your isolation period. Please note that new government guidance for Wales will be coming shortly, which you can view [here](#).

In **Scotland**, people who have symptoms must isolate immediately and book a PCR test. Those who test positive should self-isolate for a period of 10 days. More information is available [here](#).

Wherever you are, if an employee tests positive, you should check the COVID-19 guidelines in your area and notify any staff members who had close contact with them, as they may need to test and isolate as well.

- Sick pay policies

Rules for Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) have been updated as of 24 March 2022. Before, staff were entitled to SSP if they were self-isolating after testing positive, having someone in their household test positive, being told to isolate by an NHS test and trace service or their doctor.

Now, employees are no longer entitled to SSP for self-isolation unless they are off sick. Statutory Sick Pay is also no longer required to be paid from the first day of absence.

- Avoid discrimination issues

Under the Equality Act 2010, which includes physical and mental health conditions, you may need to make reasonable adjustments for employees with disabilities. Make sure you have a disability leave policy that treats absence linked to someone's disability as separate from sickness absence. Discrimination cases can be costly and damaging to a business' reputation, so look after employees as best you can.

Further sources

You can find additional information on this topic using the following guides from our preferred partner, Citation.

- [Managing short-term sickness guide](#)

- [Managing long-term sickness guide](#)