



The business owners guide to managing long-term sickness absence

Long-term sickness absence is on the rise

Long-term sickness absence is on the rise, driven by factors such as mental health conditions, long COVID, and chronic illnesses. Managing absenteeism effectively is crucial for business continuity, compliance with employment law, and employee well-being.

This guide provides practical strategies for preventing and managing long-term sickness absence in the workplace, along with key risks associated with failing to address the issue.

Understanding Long-Term Sickness Absence

Long-term sickness absence is typically defined as an employee being off work for four or more weeks. Unlike short-term absence, long-term absence often requires a more structured and supportive approach, balancing business needs with legal responsibilities.

Common Causes of Long-Term Sickness:

- Mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress)
- Long COVID and post-viral fatigue syndromes
- Musculoskeletal disorders (e.g., back pain, repetitive strain injury)
- Chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes, heart disease, cancer treatment)
- Workplace injuries or accidents

Preventing Sickness Absence

While some absences are unavoidable, many can be prevented through proactive management strategies. Employers should focus on fostering a healthy work environment and supporting employee well-being.

Promoting Employee Well-Being

- Implement workplace wellness initiatives, such as mental health awareness campaigns and stress management workshops.
- Encourage work-life balance through flexible working options.
- Provide access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) offering confidential support.

Effective Management Practices

- Train managers to recognise early signs of stress or burnout.
- Encourage open dialogue between employees and line managers regarding workloads and personal challenges.
- Develop and communicate clear absence policies, ensuring employees understand the procedures for reporting sickness.



Monitoring Absence Trends Using the Bradford Factor

The Bradford Factor is a formula used to measure the impact of employee absenteeism based on frequency and duration.

Formula: $S^2 \times D = B$

S = Number of instances of absence

D = Total number of days absent

B = Bradford Factor score

A high Bradford Factor score typically indicates frequent short-term absences, which may signal underlying issues requiring attention. Employers can use this tool to identify trends and intervene early.

Managing Long-Term Sickness Absence

Once an employee has been absent for an extended period, employers should follow structured steps to facilitate their return while ensuring legal compliance.

1. Maintaining Communication

- Keep in regular contact with absent employees in a sensitive and supportive manner.
- Agree on a suitable level of contact and method (e.g., phone calls, emails, meetings).
- Avoid making employees feel pressured to return prematurely.



2. Using Occupational Health Services

- Arrange Occupational Health Assessments to assess an employee's ability to return to work.
- Obtain professional advice on reasonable adjustments, such as phased returns, modified duties, or workplace adaptations.
- Use occupational health reports as part of an evidence-based decision-making process.

3. Implementing a Return-to-Work Plan

- Consider phased returns, where employees gradually increase working hours.
- Adjust workloads or reassign duties to accommodate medical restrictions.
- Schedule regular check-ins to review progress and address concerns.

4. Considering Reasonable Adjustments

Under the Equality Act 2010, some long-term illnesses may be classified as disabilities, requiring employers to make reasonable adjustments. These can include:

- Providing ergonomic equipment
- Allowing flexible work arrangements
- Reducing working hours temporarily

The Risks of Not Managing Absence Properly

Failure to address long-term sickness absence correctly can have serious financial, legal, and reputational consequences.

Legal Risks

- Dismissals related to ill health must be handled fairly and lawfully, considering all reasonable adjustments.
- Failure to accommodate disabilities may lead to disability discrimination claims under the Equality Act 2010.
- Not following correct procedures could result in unfair dismissal claims, leading to costly tribunals.

Financial Risks

- Increased staff turnover and recruitment costs due to unresolved absence issues.
- Higher sickness absence costs, including statutory sick pay (SSP) and temporary staffing cover.
- Reduced productivity and business efficiency from understaffed teams.

Employee Morale and Workplace Culture Risks

- Poor absence management can damage employee morale and engagement.
- Colleagues covering absent employees may experience higher workloads and stress, leading to additional absences.
- Failure to support employees may impact the company's reputation and ability to attract talent.

Conclusion: A Proactive Approach to Managing Absence

Effective sickness absence management requires a balance between business needs and employee welfare. By implementing preventative strategies, using occupational health services, and ensuring legal compliance, employers can reduce long-term sickness cases and support employees in returning to work successfully.



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managing long-term
sickness absence?
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