

Frequent sickness

Spotting problems early will enable you to put the right support in place.

As a manager, it is your responsibility to review absence history and discuss any problems with your staff. Identifying potential problems early will enable you to put the right support in place to minimise future absences.

Know what you're looking for

Short-term sickness is absence that lasts less than 28 calendar days. Everyone has short-term sickness absence during their working lives, often because of common illnesses such as colds and flu. However, frequent, ad hoc absence can, indicate an underlying issue with a staff member or team.

When reviewing absence history, look for patterns to the absence, for example, a collection of Fridays or Mondays or days after a bank holiday. Also look for themes in the reasons given for absence and review any fit notes for recurring information.

Discuss what you find

Where a pattern is identified, speak to the individual about it to see if there is any underlying reason for the absences. Often, just having a conversation is enough to alert staff to the need to address any underlying causes or behaviour. Discuss how they approach health and wellbeing and refer them to any initiatives your organisation supports for health and wellbeing, for example, staff counselling, weight management, exercise classes or discounts for gyms.

In some cases, however, you could have uncovered an underlying health or mental health problem, difficulties within the team or a problem with the working environment. Putting the right support in place early, e.g. referrals to occupational health or physiotherapy available, can help to minimise any potential future absence.

If no underlying issue is evident, you should be clear with your staff member that their attendance needs to improve, how this will be measured, and the consequences if it does not. You may need to refer to your organisation's sickness absence policy.

Monitor the situation

Keep track of whether an absence pattern is improving or getting worse and look out for any unusual patterns of absence, e.g. if a staff member is experiencing more absences, or more frequent absences than usual. Your observations could enable further discussions and identify emerging issues.

Be sensitive and supportive

Adapting your approach depending on what you find, and your staff member's reaction, should enable you to be sensitive where necessary and find the right mix of supportive and firm. You need to approach such situations as a line manager and not a clinician. It is important to be mindful of the cost and effects of frequent absence on the workload and the team whilst remembering that there may be personal or sensitive circumstances affecting absence.

If you notice someone is becoming withdrawn and quiet, create a suitable confidential environment to tell them what you have noticed, ask them if they are OK and offer them the opportunity to discuss things.

[Top tip] Appropriate training can assist you with being able to identify changes in employee behaviour that might result in increased absences, and drawing the employee into discussing these.

Know where to go for help

Your organisation will have policies on things like special leave, should your staff require a period of time away from the workplace for personal reasons. Your occupational health (OH) provider can also help with signposting to specialist services, e.g. for drug or alcohol dependency, domestic violence or depression.

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) advisory handbook is a useful starting point for handling short-term absence. Consider making reasonable adjustments.

Usually staff will be able to return to their role and work environment. However, you may need to ask if any adjustments could be made to allow them to return to work and/or prevent further absences. The sooner you have this conversation, the more time you will have to arrange for the support, equipment or adjustments needed. Making adjustments could also mean your staff member could return to work sooner.