

Long term sickness

Your role is to support your staff to maintain a connection with the workplace.

Long-term sickness absence is defined as a continuous period of absence lasting more than 28 days. The employee must give you a 'fit note' (formerly a 'sick note') if they're absent for more than seven days. Hospital doctors or GPs provide these, but may charge a fee if a fit note is requested before seven days. The fit note will say the employee is either 'not fit for work' or 'may be fit for work'.

If the fit note says the employee 'may be fit for work', you should discuss any changes with the employee that might help them return to work, such as different hours or tasks. You can get support from your occupational health (OH) provider if you need help and advice on making reasonable adjustments.

Keep in contact

It is important to maintain regular contact with your employee when their absence becomes long term. This will allow you to keep track of their progress and will also provide an important connection for your staff member back to the world of work.

Agree with the employee how and when you will catch up and how they will keep you informed of any developments in their treatment and recovery. You want them to feel that you are sympathetic to their situation, but that you are also keeping them under review so you can support them back into the workplace.

As their manager, you should be aware of what the next step is for the employee, such as a GP review or hospital appointment. Your aim should be to facilitate their return to work, and your staff member should understand this aim.

Manage their workload

Decide whether your team can cover the absent employee's workload or whether you need to recruit additional staff.

To help you decide, consider:

- how long the absence is expected to be (if known)

- the duties that need to be delegated
- whether these duties could be sustainably covered in the team.

Know your procedures

Find out your organisation's policies and procedures for supporting and managing long-term absence. This will usually involve discussions with HR and a referral to occupational health (OH).

Check if there is any training available for you in your organisation to help apply the correct procedures and have discussions with your staff about their health.

NICE recommends that you arrange for a more detailed assessment of the employee's situation by relevant specialists, if necessary. This could be coordinated by a suitably trained caseworker.

NICE also recommends coordinating and supporting any health, occupational or rehabilitation interventions or services received by the employee, and any return-to-work plan agreed with the employee.

Actively manage the absence

The key to actively managing long-term sickness absence is to always know what the next step will be for your employee, even if it is that they have an appointment booked which they are waiting for. This allows you to support your employee as much as possible throughout the absence and helps you to avoid allowing the absence to drift, and the employee to feel forgotten about.

Organisations are increasingly adopting an active case management approach to sickness absence cases, where HR, OH, the line manager, the employee and - where appropriate - the GP, other medical professionals and/or staff side representatives work together to support the employee and manage the absence.

Agree early on who the case manager will be so they can ensure the process is streamlined, and there are minimal unnecessary delays, such as with sharing information between each party, or getting appointments.

If absence continues

if the absence continues for more than 28 days, you need to meet with them to review their absence and discuss possible options. The purpose of the absence review meeting is to offer you and the staff member the opportunity to discuss the nature of their absence, and next steps for returning to work or continued absence, in a positive and supportive way.

Make sure that your staff understand that this meeting does not constitute part of the disciplinary process. Be open and supportive, and encourage your staff member to bring forward any concerns that might be affecting their attendance. Also ask them for any ideas about what would help them return to work.

If a return to work is not possible, you will need to discuss the options with HR and OH, consulting relevant policies. Encourage your employee to seek support from staff side representatives where appropriate.