

## Reasons for absence

## **Some of the most common reasons for sickness in the NHS.**

### **Mental Health**

You have a key role to play in improving mental wellbeing in your workplace.

While it is sometimes seen as a challenging issue to talk about, you don't need to be an expert in mental health to support your staff. However, you do have a key role to play in improving mental wellbeing in your workplace.

Having open conversations with staff about their mental health, providing support and creating a culture of positive mental wellbeing in your team can make a big difference to how staff are able to manage stress and other mental health problems.

Mental health can fluctuate along a spectrum in the same way that physical health can, and there may be times when it is better than others. Mental health problems should be supported in the same honest and consistent way that physical health problems are. This includes making reasonable adjustments where appropriate.

### **Types of mental health conditions**

Mental health problems cover a range of conditions, including: depression, anxiety, panic attacks, obsessive compulsive disorder, phobias, bipolar disorder (manic depression), schizophrenia, personality disorders and psychosis. Find out more about particular conditions on the Mind website.

### **Encouraging positive mental wellbeing**

You can create and maintain positive mental wellbeing in your team by:

- making sure staff understand their own objectives, their team's objectives and the organisation's objectives, including the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback
- giving staff control over how they deliver their work where possible

- monitoring the workload of staff, to ensure what they are expected to deliver is realistic within the timescales, and that resources are available
- being fair and consistent in dealings with staff and applying your organisation's policies. You should take account of individual circumstances but overall be consistent so that all staff feel fairly treated
- informing staff about organisation or team changes, and explaining the rationale for actions and decisions taken
- encouraging open and honest communication, by creating a culture where people are treated with dignity and respect, and bullying and harassment is not tolerated. This includes encouraging staff to talk about mental health, and creating a safe environment for staff to disclose their own mental health problems
- encouraging staff to ask questions and have discussions during periods of change, even if not all the information is available. This can alleviate rumors and allow staff to vent feelings in a safe environment
- being clear and consistent about the kind of reasonable adjustments available that could support staff
- considering early referral to occupational health and employee assistance programmes.

More information about stress and its impact on the workplace can be found on NHS Employers website.

## **Colds and flu**

**The proven and most effective method to prevent catching the flu is to be vaccinated annually.**

Frontline healthcare workers are more likely to contract colds and the influenza virus than the general population, particularly during the winter months when some of their patients will become infected. It is estimated that up to one in four healthcare workers will become infected with flu

during a mild influenza season; a much higher incidence than in the general population.

The proven and most effective method to prevent catching the flu is to be vaccinated annually. The Department of Health, the General Medical Council and the British Medical Association all recommend that healthcare workers directly involved in patient care are vaccinated annually. Vaccination limits the spread of the virus and protects the frontline staff, their families and vulnerable patients from contracting the virus.

As a result of these recommendations, all frontline NHS employees are entitled to a free seasonal flu vaccination. Make sure your team knows this and can access the vaccination if eligible.

Flu can have a very serious impact on the health of your staff - even ordinarily healthy people and the young can develop severe complications from influenza, and up to one third of deaths caused by flu in the past few years were in people previously considered healthy.

Even when an influenza infection is not life-threatening, an unwell member of staff may still be absent for two weeks or more, raising potentially serious business continuity issues within departments or your organisation as a whole.

By encouraging influenza vaccination amongst your staff you are not only caring for the individual's health and wellbeing but the wellbeing of your department. Staff should also be encouraged to practise good hand hygiene to limit the spread of infection.

Many myths circulate about the protection provided by the influenza vaccine. Familiarise yourself with these myths and talk to your team to encourage them to get vaccinated, to help keep themselves and their families healthy.

For more information about your organisation's seasonal flu vaccination campaign contact your occupational health department.

## **Sickness and diarrhoea**

## **Regularly reinforce hand hygiene procedures to help reduce incidents of diarrhoea and vomiting (D&V).**

Diarrhoea is when a person experiences loose and watery bowel movements much more frequently than usual. It has multiple causes, including medication and bacterial or parasitic infections and viruses. These can also cause periods of vomiting which should be treated with the same caution as diarrhoea. Other symptoms include nausea, fever and stomach pains.

Some people think that sickness and diarrhoea, sometimes referred to as D&V (Diarrhoea and Vomiting) is common in hospitals. However due to hospital hand hygiene procedures D&V is more likely to be picked up outside of a hospital.

Regularly reinforce hand hygiene procedures to help reduce incidents of D&V. A person with diarrhoea and vomiting should be considered very infectious. If an employee has these symptoms (or they are looking after someone who has them) advise them to:

- stay off work until they (or the person they are looking after) have 48 hours symptom free
- seek medical advice if they feel very unwell, preferably via phone
- avoid visiting hospital or a GP surgery where possible as this could spread infection
- avoid preparing food that others will consume until they are 48 hours symptom free
- drink plenty of fluids to counteract the dehydration these symptoms cause
- follow cleanliness advice for D&V offered by the Health Protection Agency (HPA).
- Work with your employee to ensure they know to stay away from work until they are free of symptoms for 48 hours.

Speak to occupational health to find out the local policies in place for D&V and for further support and advice. Inform your staff of local policies and

what is expected of them.

## **Stress**

### **Mental health and stress problems accounts for 30 per cent of the total sickness absence in the NHS.**

Although stress itself is not an illness, prolonged exposure to unmanageable stress can lead to long-term illnesses, such as anxiety and depression. Therefore managing stress is a key part of your role in creating a mentally healthy workplace.

While stress is sometimes seen as a challenging issue to talk about, you don't need to be an expert in mental health to support your staff. Having open conversations with staff about their stress can make a big difference to how well they are able to manage it.

Be clear about the reason you are speaking to the member of staff, as well as emphasising that you are talking to them to support their wellbeing. Reasons why you might want to speak to an employee about stress include poorer performance, lateness or any changes in their behaviour that you or colleagues have noticed.

It is important for you to be seen as approachable and make time for your staff. Have protected time when staff can speak to you, as well as regular catch-ups. Catch-ups with staff are an opportunity to start a conversation about managing stress and for this to be seen as a normal part of line management.

You can support your staff to manage stress by:

- monitoring the workload of your staff to ensure it is manageable; this will help your staff identify and manage their own causes of stress in the workplace
- reducing the financial impact of workplace stress and absence on staff
- encouraging staff to have a good work-life balance, including being involved with social events and physical activities, which are shown to boost staff health, team work and mental wellbeing

- promoting and teaching staff about relevant organisational policies, such as flexible working
- treating all your staff consistently and fairly, and providing positive feedback to them when they do a good job
- making staff aware of the internal resources that are available to them such as occupational health or Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs)
- following-up problems on behalf your team as soon as they arise.

The Health, Safety and Wellbeing Partnership Group published guidance the prevention and management of stress at work. The guidance includes information on:

- defining stress, signs of stress and examples of stress symptoms
- identifying causes of stress in the workplace
- the impact of organisational change on stress
- how you can effectively measure stress in the workplace
- management behaviours which have a positive and negative impact on stress at work
- the importance of working in partnership

There is also a useful checklist on how to implement an effective stress management policy.

## **Cancer**

**Understand that each case is individual with different and often complex needs - there are no words, actions or situations that work for everyone.**

There are more than 100,000 cases of cancer diagnosed every year within the working-age population of the UK. Many of these people will continue to work during their treatment, and return to work after they recover. However being diagnosed with cancer is still a life-changing event and

can cause many other side effects such as depression and anxiety. People taking care of those with cancer can also develop health problems, due to emotional strain and physical exhaustion.

Take time to talk to and listen to your employee. Although cancer can be difficult to talk about, and you may be unsure of what to say to support your employee, you don't need to be an expert in counselling to help. For many people dealing with cancer, just knowing that colleagues are there to support them can be a great help, and what really matters is that you are ready to help your employee when needed, with time to listen and the ability to arrange extra help where required.

Understand that each case is individual with different and often complex needs - there are no words, actions or situations that work for everyone. Each employee will require tailored and personalised help. Listening carefully will help you to offer the right support to your employee; if you can't provide certain help or advice, find out who can offer this support in your organisation and arrange for it to happen.

Always talk through the options with the employee to plan the best way forward. You can put your employee at ease when you talk to them by:

- giving them your full attention
- having the talk in a calm, quiet and relaxed environment, free from interruptions
- letting the employee lead the conversation and encouraging them to talk
- not rushing the conversation
- trying to keep the conversation as supportive and positive as you can

Offer your employee services they might need such as: workplace adjustments, time off, or counselling. Contact your human resources and occupational health departments to find out what help they can offer your employee.

Ensure you familiarise yourself with ill-health retirement and long-term absence policies, and cancer-specific policies in your organisation.



Macmillan Cancer Support has many useful sources of information and help freely available on their website.

## **Musculo-skeletal**

**Musculo-skeletal disorders account for around 40 per cent of overall sickness absence in the NHS, and in many cases become long term absences.**

Musculo-skeletal Disorders (MSDs) include back pain, arm or neck strains and diseases of the joints. MSDs can affect all parts of the workforce, and can be caused by work-related injuries, such as incorrect handling techniques or not having equipment personally adjusted for the employee.

In order to effectively manage MSDs, organisations are advised to have a MSD policy which is implemented, reviewed, updated and made available to all staff. As a manager, you play a key role in providing support to employees as you are the first point of contact when they experience difficulties which may affect their work and wellbeing.

Early intervention can make a big difference in shortening the employee's recovery time and preventing a potential long term absence. Rapid access services can provide prompt support to staff (for example physiotherapy services) in order for them to return to work. These services may be available to staff through referral by you, the occupational health department or through self-referral systems which many organisations now operate. Make sure you are aware of any rapid access services that are available in your organisation.

To help prevent work-related MSDs and long term absences:

- encourage your staff and their safety representatives to tell you when MSDs start to develop
- review your risk assessments regularly and when necessary
- regularly check the accident book and sickness absence records
- respond promptly when someone reports a MSD

- have information and advice on MSDs on hand
- learn about any rapid access services available
- use all available information to identify measures that will enable you to reduce the risk to employees and others
- arrange modified working when necessary (rehabilitation and redeployment) to help people stay at work until they are fit to resume their usual job.

When managing employees with MSDs, you may become involved in helping to rehabilitate and redeploy staff. This could include:

- helping staff to access rapid access services such as occupational therapy, physiotherapy and counselling
- designing return to work plans including therapeutic return and phased return
- making reasonable adjustments for staff
- redeploying staff if it is not possible for them to resume their original role.

Getting your employee back to work sooner will benefit both them and the organisation, and in many cases help speed up their recovery.

### **Staff who are carers**

**Around six thousand people become unpaid carers of their loved ones every day in the UK.**

Often this happens slowly, becoming more demanding over time as illnesses progress. Occasionally people will become carers suddenly due to incidences such as accidents or strokes.

Sometimes employees may be afraid to admit to their managers that they are carers outside of work, as they worry it will impact on their career. They may prefer to keep things quiet and carry on with little help. However

caring duties can cause health problems as the carer may become more mentally or physically exhausted over time, and receiving help and support can prevent this.

As a manager, you should be aware that employees who are carers will require more support, such as working flexibly, agreeing special leave or just talking through their options.

If you find out your employee is also a carer, start a conversation with them and discuss support options available - they may just need some flexibility in working hours or other arrangements such as emergency planning and time off work.

You should also consider the mental and physical health of your employees who are carers, as caring can be very demanding. Find out what support your employee needs and refer them to appropriate services, such as local support groups - your human resources and occupational health departments can help you with this.

Make yourself aware of your organisation's policies about carers, and communicate these to your team. Contact your human resources and occupational health departments for information.