Managing Sickness Absence and Attendance

Sickness absence needs a consistent process: record the dates, establish whether the employee can work, understand what support is needed and decide the next step fairly. Reliable records help an employer distinguish short illnesses, recurring absence and longer-term health conditions.

1. Start with a clear reporting process

Tell staff how and when to report that they cannot attend work, who they should contact and how updates should be provided. Record the reported start date, affected shifts, reason category, expected return and any follow-up agreed. Avoid relying only on informal messages to an individual manager.

Situation	What the employer should record
Short illness	Dates, self-certification where relevant, work missed and return date.
More than seven calendar days	Fit note and any indication that the employee might be fit with support.
Recurring short absences	Separate episodes, patterns and follow-up conversations without assuming misconduct.
Longer-term health condition	Contact plan, fit-note recommendations, occupational-health input where appropriate and adjustments considered.

2. Self-certification and fit notes

An employee can self-certify sickness lasting seven calendar days or less. For absence exceeding seven calendar days, a fit note will generally be required. The seven days include weekends and other non-working days.

A fit note may say “not fit for work” or “may be fit for work”. The latter should start a discussion about what changes might help the person return, such as a phased return, different duties or a temporary change in hours.

Example A | A return with shorter shifts

An employee usually works five-hour shifts. A fit note suggests reduced hours for two weeks, and the employer can offer three-hour shifts temporarily.

Employer response: Agree the dates and duties, amend the temporary work schedule, record the arrangement and review it before the normal pattern resumes.

3. Handle return-to-work conversations consistently

A short, private return-to-work discussion can check whether the employee is ready to return, whether anything contributed to the absence and whether further support is needed. It should not be treated automatically as a disciplinary interview.

4. Understand patterns without jumping to conclusions

Absence figures can highlight cases that need attention, but they do not explain the underlying reason. A frequency measure such as the Bradford Factor may be used as a prompt for a conversation, not as an automatic disciplinary decision. Consider disability, pregnancy-related absence, workplace stress and possible adjustments before taking action.

Example B | Several Monday absences

An employee has three short spells of sickness, all beginning on a Monday. A manager notices the pattern in attendance records.

Employer response: Check the facts and discuss the absences privately. There may be an underlying health or work-related issue; do not assume the pattern proves dishonesty.

5. Sickness, holiday and pay are separate records

Sickness absence can affect the employee's attendance and sick-pay entitlement while statutory holiday can continue accruing. If illness prevents someone from taking annual leave, carry-over rules may apply. Preserve the absence category and the leave-year history separately so one record does not overwrite another.

6. Common avoidable mistakes

- Treating every sickness notification as misconduct rather than first establishing the reason and evidence.
- Applying a uniform absence trigger without considering disability-related or pregnancy-related circumstances.
- Failing to record an agreed phased return and then treating the shorter shifts as unexplained absence.

How Assyst helps employers manage sickness absence

Assyst provides a formal absence-notification facility in the staff app. Employees can report that they will be absent, record the reason and give their anticipated return-to-work date. The notification is escalated to their manager, and the affected timesheets are updated automatically. Assyst keeps the absence history, supporting documents and return-to-work information together in the employee's HR record. HR reporting enables employers to review the type, frequency and duration of absences, identify recurring patterns and assess whether support, further investigation or, where appropriate, a formal attendance or disciplinary process may be necessary. Managers can consider the recorded facts and individual circumstances before taking action.

Discuss your workforce requirements with Assyst

Assyst Workforce Management is a workforce management platform for multi-site employers, bringing together HR and paperless onboarding, time and attendance, workforce scheduling, payroll calculations, task management and a mobile staff app. To find out more or discuss how Assyst could support your business, visit www.assyst.uk and contact us through the website.

Useful official sources

Acas — Returning to work after absence | https://www.acas.org.uk/returning-to-work-after-absence

Acas — Fit notes and proof of sickness | https://www.acas.org.uk/fit-notes-and-proof-of-sickness

GOV.UK — Taking sick leave | https://www.gov.uk/taking-sick-leave

General guidance for employers in Great Britain, reviewed November 2026. Contract terms and individual circumstances may require professional advice.