

# Managing sickness absence and return to work

A practical guide for safety representatives

## Why is this important?

As a safety representative, you'll know only too well that work is vital to people's health and self-esteem. When workers are off sick for a long time it can affect all aspects of their lives, often causing isolation and depression. Getting sickness absence down is not only about defending business productivity and profits. It's also about protecting workers' health and well-being and safeguarding jobs.

So you'll be pleased to know that the Better Backs campaign is not just about promoting sensible workplace precautions that reduce the risk of back pain. It also emphasises the positive benefits of staying active with back pain and encourages employers and workers to work together to help people return to normal activities including work.

## Facts

- Being off sick is bad for people's health.
- Back pain is one of the main reasons for workers taking time off.
- Staying in bed or resting for more than a day or two usually doesn't help and may make things worse, unless specifically recommended by a doctor.
- Staying active and in work helps recovery.
- There are things that employers can and should do to help people with back pain return to work safely.
- Safety representatives can help workers and managers put these measures in place.

## What can you do to help?

This leaflet gives you some ideas. Use it, and the other Better Backs information in the campaign pack, and play an active role to help manage sickness absence and return to work in your workplace. You



will make a real difference to the lives of workers who get back problems and promote a safe and active workplace for everyone.

### Work with your employer

#### *Help manage the risks of back pain*

You could help identify work-related manual handling risks using HSE's Manual Handling Assessment Charts (MAC) tool. Share your findings and work with your employer. For example, if you believe that back pain is likely to have been caused by work, assist your employer to make workplace changes to reduce the risks.

#### *Suggest your employer develops plans for dealing with sickness absence*

You could suggest that safety committee meetings look at sickness absence. Why not talk to your employer about what happens in your workplace when someone's off

sick? There is a timeline and suggested actions for managing return to work in Information Sheet 2 – *A short guide to managing sickness absence* of the Better Backs campaign pack.

**Help plan transitional arrangements to enable workers with back pain return to work**

You could talk with workers and managers about what changes are needed and make practical suggestions. Remember that workers can be helped back to work quickly but this does not mean that they should resume exactly the same activities – in particular, lifting and carrying will need to be limited or avoided. Any transitional arrangements should be time-bound with a specific goal in mind.

**Work with colleagues and those with back pain**

**Help keep workers on sick leave in touch with work**

Workers might be worried about their manager contacting them. You could help reassure them. You could even offer to go along during home visits and be with workers at their return to work interview.

**Support workers with back pain to return to work**

You could encourage them to talk with their GP about getting back to work. Talk about how transitional arrangements at work could help them return and help raise their concerns with managers and colleagues.

**Help staff understand back pain**

You could use the materials on the Better Backs campaign website, or in the campaign pack, to raise awareness of how important it is to look after your back.

**Quick checklist**

Question	Yes/No
Is back pain and time off monitored to help find out where there are problems?	
Are there standard procedures for managing staff when they come back after time off sick?	
Are managers keeping in touch with workers who are off sick?	
Are workers helped to get back to work with transitional working arrangements?	
Are the transitional arrangements regularly reviewed?	
Do managers talk with the wider workforce about why any transitional arrangements are put in place?	
Do workers know that keeping active helps back pain?	

**Want to know more?**

*Working together to prevent sickness absence becoming job loss: Practical advice for safety and other trade union representatives.* Only available online at [www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web02.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web02.pdf)

*Off work sick and worried about your job? Steps you can take to help your return to work* Leaflet INDG397 HSE Books 2004 (single copy free or priced packs of 15 ISBN 0 7176 2915 5) Web version: [www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg397.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg397.pdf)

*Managing sickness absence and return to work: An employers' and managers' guide* HSG249 HSE Books ISBN 0 7176 2882 5

*Manual handling assessment charts* Leaflet INDG383 HSE Books 2003 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 2741 1) Web version: [www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg383.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg383.pdf)

**Better Backs campaign pack (available online at [betterbacks.hse.gov.uk](http://betterbacks.hse.gov.uk))**

Information Sheet 2 – *A short guide to managing sickness absence*  
 Information Sheet 3 – *Managing sickness absence and return to work: Practical advice for employers and managers*

**Other sources of help and advice**

[www.betterbacks.hse.gov.uk](http://www.betterbacks.hse.gov.uk)  
[www.hse.gov.uk/sicknessabsence](http://www.hse.gov.uk/sicknessabsence)  
[www.hse.gov.uk/workers/safetyreps](http://www.hse.gov.uk/workers/safetyreps)  
[www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

**For more information about managing back pain and the Better Backs campaign, visit [betterbacks.hse.gov.uk](http://betterbacks.hse.gov.uk) or phone HSE's Infoline on: 0845 345 0055**