

# MANAGING LONG TERM SICKNESS

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## Introduction

Long-term sickness absence is usually defined as a period of continuous absence of more than four weeks.

The absence may be due to:

- an unexpected illness
- a chronic condition
- an accident or planned operation

As an employer, you must take care to manage the situation sensitively and supportively.

When an employee is off sick for a long time, you can appreciate that your employee is unwell, and you sympathise with them but sick leave can place a significant financial burden on a small business. It's often difficult to cover the absent employee's work, placing an additional burden on other employees, and it can negatively impact your ability to run your business.

What often happens, particularly in small businesses, is that the strain of an employee on long-term sick leave leads to rash decisions being made, which, in some cases, can lead to costly disability discrimination claims.

### **How to manage long term sickness**

If your employee has been off for more than 4 weeks and there are no plans for an imminent return, you should invite them to a formal stage 1 absence meeting.

Try to be flexible by offering to hold the meeting at their home and with a family member present or in a neutral location with a work colleague/friend or over zoom or via telephone, if they wish.

Explain the impact their absence is having on the business both financially and operationally.

As this is a formal meeting, appropriate notice should be given to the employee and they should be offered the right to be accompanied.

At the meeting try to understand the condition and whether any reasonable adjustments could be made for a return to work.

Ensure you take notes and follow up in writing.

Consult with healthcare professionals, either a GP report or referral to occupational health, ensuring you follow the specific procedures.

Hold another meeting to discuss the content of the medical report.

If the report indicates that there is no imminent return to work, then consider dismissal on health grounds.

This can be a sensitive and tricky situation so always seek expert advice before proceeding with dismissal.

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WITH ALL OF THEIR HR NEEDS**

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