

Time off for medical and dental appointments, eye tests and for health screening



Bargaining Support Group

UNISON
the public service union

Time off for medical and dental appointments, eye tests and for health screening

What is needed?

Fair sickness absence policies, aimed at supporting staff recovering from illness or injury, are a key part of creating a healthy workplace.

But as well as managing sickness absence fairly, employers should aim to deliver a healthy and safe workplace that minimises the workplace causes of sickness absence and encourages staff to take an active role in their health and wellbeing.

However, there is no legal requirement for an employer to grant paid time off to attend medical and dental and eye test appointments and health screening.

But extending the right to paid time off for such appointments will inevitably encourage employees to take up opportunities to improve and maintain their health, and avoid sickness absence.

UNISON reps and branches need to negotiate with employers to ensure they encourage staff to take an active role in their health and wellbeing by:

- **raising awareness among staff of medical conditions and ways to improve their health**
- **providing paid time off to attend medical and dental and eye test appointments and health screenings**
- **not recording this time off as sick leave but acknowledging that staff are instead making a positive step to keeping well.**

Who will benefit?

Such a policy will benefit **the whole workforce and help protect colleagues and service users.**

For example, in relation to the COVID-19 vaccination, [Acas guidance](#) states: “To encourage staff to get the vaccine, employers might consider:

- sharing government vaccine health information with staff
- offering paid time off for vaccination appointments
- paying staff their usual rate of pay if they're off sick with vaccine side effects, instead of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP)
- not counting vaccine-related absences in absence records or towards any 'trigger' system the organisation may have
- arranging informal conversations during work time between staff who have had the vaccine and anyone who's not sure about getting it.”

UNISON would argue that such an approach for other forms of medical, dental and eye test appointments and screening would be both sensible and necessary for a healthy workforce.

For employees, there are clear health benefits to such a policy:

- Staff managing long-term health conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure or depression that require regular medical checks or counselling support, will be particularly supported.
- Employees wishing to be screened for cancers (such as prostate cancer in men), access physiotherapy for back pain or obtain medically-recommended follow-up and rehabilitation appointments can improve their health and prevent more serious conditions.
- Workers will be encouraged to protect themselves and colleagues and service users by taking advantage of vaccinations against infectious diseases such as 'flu, COVID-19 and mpox (monkeypox).

Benefits for women

In addition, such a policy could have a particularly beneficial impact on women, given the range of issues that can affect women in the workplace.

Regular check-ups for HRT treatment, family planning issues, fertility treatment, cervical or mammographic screening (important for detecting cervical and breast cancer), are just some of the examples of when women would require time-off under such a policy.

Further information:

Menopause

www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/02/26305_menopause_guide-1.pdf

Women's reproductive health issues

www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2017/12/Womens-reproductive-health-issues-dec2017.pdf

All pregnant employees and eligible agency workers (including women undergoing fertility treatment from the point of the implantation of fertilised ova) are legally entitled to take a reasonable amount of paid time off work for the purpose of receiving **antenatal care**, such as medical appointments or parenting classes (including travelling to and from the appointments) if they have been recommended by a doctor or midwife.

A partner (the baby's father or the mother's spouse, civil partner, or partner in an enduring relationship, or the parents of a child in a qualifying surrogacy arrangement) has the right to unpaid time off work to go to two antenatal appointments lasting no more than six and a half hours each.

Further information:

Negotiating for working parents

www.unison.org.uk/negotiating-for-working-parents/

Benefits for Black workers

Black workers may also be helped by such a policy as there may be particular health conditions affecting them, such as sickle cell disease, the most serious type being sickle cell anaemia. Sickle cell disease is the name for a group of inherited conditions that mainly affect people of African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Eastern Mediterranean and Asian family background.

Benefits for disabled workers

A time off policy for health screenings and medical appointments is likely to be of great benefit to disabled workers too.

Under the Equality Act 2010¹, employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments where failure to do so would place the disabled worker at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled workers. Time off for medical appointments and for treatment related to the worker's impairment, may be seen as a reasonable adjustment to prevent disadvantage to some disabled staff.

Further information:

Disability leave

www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/10/25870.pdf

Proving disability and reasonable adjustments

<https://shop.unison.site/product/proving-disability-and-reasonable-adjustments/>

Reasonable adjustments

www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/10/25875_reasonableadjustments.pdf

Benefits for trans workers

People who decide to undergo medical or surgical procedures for gender reassignment will need some time off work. It is unlawful to treat trans people less favourably for being absent from work for gender reassignment than they would be treated if they were ill or injured.

Best practice is for branches to negotiate adequate paid time off, distinct from other sick leave. Gender reassignment treatment should not be regarded as elective or cosmetic. Time off should ideally be recorded separately from sickness absence and not used for absence management or monitoring purposes by the employer.

Further information:

Transgender workers' rights

www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/01/2022-Trans-workers-rights.docx

¹ In Northern Ireland, this requirement is enshrined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995

Awareness of the particular concerns and issues that women, disabled people, Black people, trans people and other groups may face, should inform the development and use of time off, sickness absence and health and safety policies.

Without these considerations, all staff may not be treated fairly and equally.

More information about [Equality Impact Assessments](#)

www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2022/01/UNISON-EIA-guidance-and-flowchart-Jan-2022.docx

Convincing the employer best practice makes better sense

Best practice employers **allow time off work with pay during normal working hours** to attend medical and dental and eye test appointments and health screening. This should be the aim when bargaining over arrangements.

For the employer, there is a clear financial case for adopting such a policy, as it can help employees to avoid or reduce sickness absence, particularly through preventative treatment and diagnostic tests.

The costs to the employer of failing to adopt an enlightened approach to time off are significant. Ill health among working age people is estimated to cost the economy £100 billion a year. Recent estimates² suggest that workforce sickness absence costs employers an average of £781 per employee every year.

However, analysis suggest that the real cost for employers is even greater than that, as most employers do not take account of other relevant factors such as overtime costs, reduced performance and time taken to manage the absence process.

And these costs can apply to dental appointments, as much as for medical conditions. [The Oral Health Foundation](#) states that more than two million people in the UK say they have taken time of work in the last five years due to poor oral health, with 7% of the UK's 32 million workforce having to call in sick with their oral health at least once.

Furthermore, government statistics show that a quarter of all adults have not visited a dentist in the past two years, which means that poor oral health costs the UK economy around £36 million every year. But less than one in ten workers (only 7%) have received occupational health information from their employers about the importance of maintaining good oral health.

The [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development \(CIPD\)](#) and [SimplyHealth, Health and Well-Being at Work survey in 2022](#) found that among those employers that had invested in health and wellbeing policies, the benefits included:

- 48% of employers reported a healthier and more inclusive culture
- 46% of employers reported better employee morale and engagement

² Absence rates and costs: 2022, XpertHR survey

- 43% of employers reported better work-life balance
- 33% of employers reported more effective working relationships
- 27% of employers reported improved productivity.

Yet some employers still only allow unpaid time off for medical and dental appointments, or require employees to take annual leave or flexi-time, or to make up the time later, or simply encourage employees to always make appointments at times when they are not normally working.

But these employers are clearly imposing a disincentive to attend key checks and screenings. Inevitably this will lead to increased and potentially more long-term sickness absence when manageable conditions are neglected for too long, creating a cost to the employer far greater than that of allowing a brief period of time off for appointments.

Additionally, if employers record time off for medical appointments as sick leave, their actions may be potentially discriminatory if it leads to some groups of employees suffering a detriment when they trigger levels set in the sickness absence policy.

Only emergency medical or dental appointments requiring urgent, unforeseen attention are likely to fall within the remit of sickness absence.

Further information

Negotiating sickness absence agreements

www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/03/26752.pdf

If negotiators have any comments on this guidance or any experience of negotiations that could be usefully incorporated in the guidance, please contact Bargaining Support at bsg@unison.co.uk

Further guidance is available from bargaining support for branches and workplace reps www.unison.org.uk/bargaining

Contact your regional education teams and / or LAOS to find out what training and resources are available to assist you with negotiating with your employer or promoting the issues in this guide with your members <https://learning.unison.org.uk>

Model clause for time off policy

When making the case to an employer for paid time off during normal working hours for attending medical and dental appointments and screening, UNISON reps and branches may find it useful to present this model statement for inclusion in the organisation's time off policy.

Medical or Dental Appointments

Line managers should grant paid leave of absence for the required period of time for medical or dental appointments including:

- GP, dentist, optician and hospital appointments
- tests and check-ups including eye tests
- health screenings (such as cervical screening, mammographic screening and prostate cancer screening etc)
- IVF (In Vitro Fertilisation) and other fertility treatment
- vaccinations
- gender reassignment treatment
- counselling and psychotherapy
- rehabilitation and on-going treatment of long-term health conditions.

Staff will be expected to endeavour to arrange their appointments for outside of normal working hours so as to minimise time off work, but it is accepted that such appointments are not always available.

Disabled staff members should refer to the **Disability Leave policy** for further information on time off for disability-related sickness absence and for when a disabled employee needs to be away from work to attend medical appointments or become familiar with reasonable adjustments, or when adjusting to a new or worsened impairment.

Pregnant staff members should refer to the **Maternity Leave and Pay** policies for further information on leave entitlement including time off for antenatal and postnatal appointments.