

## Returning to work after sickness absence

Many employees find it a daunting prospect returning to work following sickness absence, particularly after a long period away. Whether you have been off sick for a day, a week or longer, your employer has a duty of care in ensuring you are able to return to work as easily as possible.

The majority of schools in the maintained sector use local authority guidelines for dealing with sickness absence, whilst colleges and independent schools may have their own policies. This factsheet answers commonly asked questions but you will also need to check your contract and any local procedures, policies and guidance in relation to sickness absence.

This advice sheet should be read in conjunction with other ATL advice sheets: *Sick leave and sick pay* and *Being off sick*.

### **What should I do when I return to work following sickness absence?**

You should first speak to your line manager to let them know you have returned. Your line manager should enquire as to your current health and whether you require any assistance following your illness. He or she should also briefly update you on any changes you may need to know of before starting work again. Your line manager might also inform you that you need to meet for a back-to-work meeting/interview (meeting is the preferred description as it should be informal).

### **I have been invited to a back-to-work meeting. What does this mean?**

There is no legal requirement for an employer to hold a back-to-work meeting but it is generally regarded as good practice. The meeting, which should take place as soon as possible after your return, is to welcome you back, enquire about your health and to discuss any implications following your return.

For example, if you have suffered an injury the employer should take this opportunity to look into any changes they may need to make to ensure your work environment is safe. Any confidentiality regarding your ill health should be respected. The meeting should be informal and generally only your line manager and you will attend.

### **Can I take my ATL representative to a back-to-work meeting?**

There is no statutory right to be represented at a back-to-work meeting although some schools/colleges' absence policies may allow you to be accompanied.

### What happens at the meeting?

Generally the meeting is likely to be brief, with your line manager simply enquiring if you are ok. However, if you have a health issue that means you need support and assistance at work, this should be discussed and agreed if possible. If counselling or welfare advice is needed, appropriate information and support should be discussed.

If your illness has been long term, or you have had a series of short-term absences, your manager may suggest you agree to see the employer's doctor via an occupational health referral. A referral to an occupational health doctor should be another way for your employer to look at ways they can support you. The doctor is likely to make recommendations in relation to your job to help you return to full health.

### Will the reasons for my absence be kept confidential?

All issues relating to your health must be treated as confidential. Such matters should not be discussed with any other party without your permission.

### What do I do if I feel my back-to-work meeting has been used to put pressure on me to come to work when I am not well?

The purpose of a back-to-work meeting should be to support employees who have not been well. However, in some cases employers do use them to try and cut down on sickness absence levels (although in many cases taking a heavy-handed approach to sickness absence can make matters worse).

If you feel your employer is not supporting you, you should contact ATL for further advice (see contact details at the end of this factsheet). If a school/college is taking such an approach to absence across the board, it may be something ATL can challenge on behalf of all its members in the establishment.



### Need advice?

Your first point of contact is your ATL rep in your school or college. Your local ATL branch is also available to help with queries, or you can contact ATL's member advisers on **020 7930 6441**, email: **info@atl.org.uk** or write to 7 Northumberland Street, London WC2N 5RD. Don't forget you can also get lots of help and advice, as well as download copies of other ATL advice sheets, on our website at **www.atl.org.uk**

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