



Module 1834

Coping with pharmacy staff absences

From this pharmacy CPD module you will learn:

- The reasons why staff may be absent from work
- How to monitor absenteeism, plan for it, and organise cover
- The importance of supporting staff when they return to work

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How do you cope when staff are away – whether it's on holiday, parental leave or on sick leave? The British economy loses some 190 million working days to absence each year, at a cost of £17 billion. There is not only a financial impact that comes with staff being away from work, absence affects the morale of your team and the ability of your pharmacy to deliver the service your customers need and expect.

For a pharmacy owner with a small team, covering staff absences can be difficult at the best of times. With community pharmacies becoming ever-leaner operations, required to do more with less resources, squeezing even more productivity out of employees who are already working harder than ever presents a challenge.

So how can your business deal with staff absences – both planned and unplanned – and mitigate the effect?

Reasons for absence

Employees can be absent for a range of reasons. People have a legal right to be absent from work for annual and parental leave, and staff may also be off sick from time to time. Of course, there are

other situations where absence from work may be necessary – such as family emergencies.

If leave is sudden and unplanned, it's up to the managers to find out why staff are off, and when they plan to come back. If it's because of an emergency, ask the staff member to let you know as soon as the situation is in-hand, so you can discuss when they hope to return to work. It's worthwhile being flexible here, because people in the middle of unexpected emergency situations are often panicked and unable to think clearly or plan ahead, and work may not be a priority for them at that moment.

Short-term illnesses are inevitable and you should be prepared for these kinds of absences to crop up – particularly in the colder months – and plan cover accordingly.

Absence due to long-term illness can usually be managed by temporarily reorganising staff schedules to accommodate it, and keeping up a dialogue about when a return is planned.

The 'fit note'

If an employee is off sick regularly (or for longer than seven calendar days at a time) you can request a 'fit note' from their doctor. This focuses on what they are able to do and whether they

may be fit to return – with some support and flexibility on your part – or whether they are unfit to work for a specified period of time.

If an employee has been unfit for work for four weeks or more (or is likely to be), their GP or employer can refer them to Fit for Work (at [fitforwork.org](https://www.fitforwork.org)) – a government occupational health service that aims to reduce long-term sick leave, by helping employees develop a return-to-work plan that is tailored to their individual needs.

Monitoring absenteeism

While most unplanned absence is down to sickness and is genuine, some is not. It's therefore worth keeping an eye on instances of staff absenteeism, to see if there are any patterns.

For example, a common method of recording absence is to ask employees to complete a leave form, which will help you and them keep track

of time taken off – including holidays – as well as reasons for absence in the case of sick leave.

It's a good idea to have a clear attendance policy that all staff are aware of. This should make it clear what staff should do if they are going to be absent, how and when they must inform you they are sick, your sick pay policy, how excessive or extended periods of absence will be managed, and what might trigger any disciplinary action.

Planned time off

From holidays to parental leave and elective surgery, there will be times when people know in advance when they are going to be away from work, which gives you the opportunity to plan ahead for this.

However, in a community pharmacy there are no 'quiet times' where accommodating these kinds of absences might be easier than others. With this in mind, you may decide to instigate



a 'first come, first served' policy for leave requests during popular times of year, such as school or religious holidays, so you don't find yourself short-staffed.

Depending on the size of your operation, you could also choose to limit the number of staff who can take planned leave at any one time, and possibly even institute a 'blackout period' where no one can take any time off. If you go down this route, make sure it is made clear in contracts for all new starters, and inform all your existing staff as soon as you put it in place, so there are no surprises.

If a staff member is going to be away for a couple of weeks, this gives other members of your team the chance to work some overtime if they wish. You might find that your part-timers are happy to take on an extra day for a few weeks, especially in the run-up to holidays.

Even if they don't want to work full days – perhaps because of childcare issues – you can draw up a staggered schedule where, for example, one person does extra mornings and another takes the afternoon shift.

Organising cover

If you have the budget for it, a sure-fire way to ensure staff leave doesn't disrupt the running of your business or stretch your existing team beyond safe limits – both for them, and for patients – is to bring in extra support.

Whether you use locums, former or retired counter staff who have worked for you before, or students in holiday time, consider setting up a pool of trusted part-timers who you can contact for some 'extra hands on deck' as and when the need arises.

The more notice you can give potential cover

Staff absences: four key points

1. Staff absences can affect the morale of your team and the ability of your pharmacy to deliver the service your customers need and expect
2. Employees can be absent for a host of reasons; some planned and justified, and others not
3. You should set up a pool of trusted part-timers who you can contact as and when the need arises
4. While staff are away, you should prioritise and delegate work among the remaining team to get necessary tasks and urgent objectives done.

the better, so it's a good idea to keep in contact with these part-timers year-round, so you can ask them about their availability ahead of time.

Drafting in extra help in this way also makes the situation fairer and easier to handle for your existing staff members, as they know that they can expect reliable support in their day-to-day roles.

Regular recruiting

As in any business, you may find periods where you are without a full complement of staff, because someone has left and you have not managed to recruit a replacement before they go. It could also be that you have promoted internally – particularly with counter staff – and still have a vacancy to fill.

In community pharmacy, your staff are your number one asset and the reason that your customers keep coming back, so you cannot afford to let any gaps open up in that service or knowledge level. It's therefore important that you pay attention to the quality of your employee pool and recruit where necessary.

This ensures you have qualified employees on hand at all times, rather than having to hire the first person who answers an advert in your hour of need.

Prioritise and delegate

Whichever way you decide to cover staff shortages, you will still need to prioritise and delegate work to get the necessary tasks done.

On a day-to-day basis, move the most important tasks to the top of everyone's to-do list, to ensure that all the urgent objectives are achieved. Set clear deadlines where needed, and make sure your staff understand how to meet customer expectations without over-committing. Planning and scheduling in this way will help you minimise any confusion over what can be done by when, and whom, and stops jobs being missed.

Being able to delegate tasks will let you make good use of existing staff and share the workload out between them. This stops members of the team taking on the majority of the burden.

If possible, planning ahead with staff members before they are due to go on leave gives them the chance to work through any priorities in the run-up to their time off – leaving everyday and less urgent tasks to then be picked up by the rest of the team.

Handover in good time

In any job where you are working as part of a team – such as in a pharmacy – each person needs to clear about what their role involves, as well as what everyone else does. This is necessary for the team to function effectively and efficiently.

It is therefore especially helpful if staff who are taking a break can put together detailed handover notes before they go. Ideally these should be notes that anyone – not just specific colleagues – can understand and action.



A staff member calling in sick does not need to be a moment of despair if you are adequately prepared

Returning to work

Don't assume that staff will be refreshed and ready to plunge straight back into work when they return – especially if they have come back from a holiday. In fact, they can often feel demotivated after some time away, which means managers have to be mindful about how best to ease their re-entry into working life and routines.

There will also be some employees who are coming back to work after having a break from employment for a variety of reasons which are not as pleasant. This could mean you and your team may have to have some sensitivity – and flexibility – around their situation.

For example, people could be coming back to the workplace after a break to look after children,



Ease employees back into work and help them feel enthusiastic about coming back

care for sick or elderly relatives, undergo surgery, or recover from illness themselves. These could all be things that they don't particularly want to talk about, so tact is necessary, even if you worked alongside them for a number of years.

If they were employed by you in the past, it's also important to avoid making assumptions that they can return to the same working pattern and duties, or that they will be up-to-date or remember everything from before their leave. Don't overload them.

You can ease them back into work and help them feel enthusiastic about coming back, by giving them time to catch up with colleagues on what's been going on in their absence, rather than expecting them to hit the ground running and pick

up where they left off.

The benefits of forward planning in a pharmacy

With customers to be helped, paperwork to be filed and services to carry out, working in community pharmacy is a balancing act in which vital tasks have to be completed without overstretching an already busy team.

When anyone is off, for whatever reason, this is a challenge, but with some careful planning you and your staff should be able to:

- manage this extra workload
- avoid stress and anxiety, and
- most importantly, keep your pharmacy running without disruption.

Coping with staff absences in your pharmacy CPD

Reflect

What are the common reasons for staff absences? How can cover for absences be organised to minimise disruption? What support can be provided for staff who are returning to work?

Plan

This article contains information about making adjustments when staff are off, including the reasons why staff may be absent from work and how to monitor absenteeism, plan for staff being away and organise cover. The importance of supporting staff when they return to work is also discussed.

Act

- Find out about the Fit For Work scheme at [fitforwork.org](https://www.fitforwork.org)
- Review or create your attendance policy, make sure it is clear, and that all staff are aware of it
- Define a policy for staff to request holiday leave
- Find out which members of staff are willing to work overtime, create a pool of part-timers to rely on when the need arises, and ensure their contact details are up to date
- Ensure cover staff have training, so they feel confident in their roles and there is less disruption in the workplace

Evaluate

Have you improved your knowledge of how to plan for staff absences from work? Could you give support to staff members returning to work?

Take the 5-minute test online

1. Staff absence affects the morale of the pharmacy team and the ability of the pharmacy to deliver customer services.
True or false
2. Employees have a legal right to be absent from work for annual leave and parental leave.
True or false
3. If an employee is off sick for three calendar days, a 'fit note' must be requested from their doctor.
True or false
4. If an employee has been unfit for work for three weeks, their GP or employer can refer them to the government's Fit for Work occupational health service.
True or false
5. Asking employees to complete a leave form will help to keep track of time taken off, including holidays and sick leave.
True or false
6. Pharmacies should have a clear attendance policy that all staff are aware of.
True or false
7. Setting up a pool of trusted part-timers who can provide cover on an as-needed basis can be useful for managing staff absences.
True or false
8. Staff can often feel demotivated after time off, and managers should be mindful about how best to ease their re-entry into working life.
True or false
9. It is safe to assume that staff who have previously worked in the pharmacy are able to continue the same working pattern and duties when they return from a long-term absence.
True or false
10. When staff are away from work, other members of the team should be able to prioritise and delegate to get the necessary tasks done.
True or false