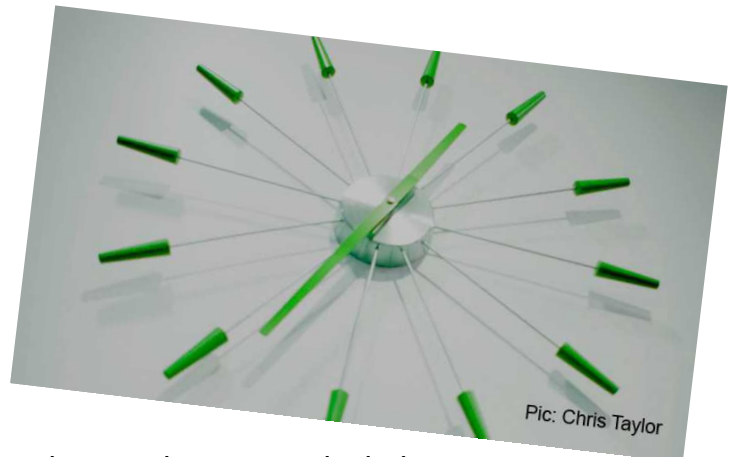


TIME OFF FOR MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS AND HEALTH SCREENING

In the modern workplace, UNISON has a significant role to play in ensuring that employers positively encourage staff to take an active role in their health and wellbeing. Taking that role seriously means raising awareness among staff of medical conditions and ways to improve their health, and providing paid time off to attend medical appointments and health screenings.



Such a policy will benefit the whole workforce but can have a particularly beneficial impact on female employees 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.

Black workers may also be helped by such a policy as there may be particular health conditions affecting them, such as sickle cell disease, 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.

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 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 could be one example of a reasonable adjustment.

Such a policy is also important for anyone who decides to undergo medical or surgical procedures for gender reassignment. 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.

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.

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 appointments and screening. This should be the aim when bargaining over arrangements.

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, are 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.

For the employer, there is a clear financial case for adopting such a policy, as it can help employees to avoid 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.

Recent estimates¹ suggest that workforce sickness absence costs employers around £837 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 those costs can apply to dental appointments as much as for more high profile medical conditions.

British Dental Health Foundation chief executive Dr Nigel Carter has said: “Significant numbers of people are forced to miss work each year unnecessarily due to avoidable poor oral health... And poor oral health is increasingly being linked to other more serious medical conditions such as diabetes, strokes and heart problems, which cause even greater difficulties for absenteeism.”

Employers who only allow unpaid time off for medical and dental appointments, or who require employees to take annual leave or flexi-time or work later to make up the time, or who simply encourage employees to always make appointments at times when they are not normally working, are imposing a clear disincentive to attend key

¹ Absence rates and costs: 2016, XpertHR survey

checks and screenings. This short-sighted approach increases the likelihood of long-term sickness absence when manageable conditions are neglected for too long, creating a cost to the employer far greater than that of allowing time off for appointments.

One of the other key issues in best practice approaches to time off, is that these types of medical screening, on-going treatment and check-up appointments are not recorded as sick leave. Such an approach is based on an acknowledgement that the employees are not sick but are making a positive step to keeping well.

Failing to adopt this approach may be potentially discriminatory as some groups of employees could suffer a detriment when they trigger levels set in the sickness absence policy for action by the employer. Only emergency medical or dental appointments requiring urgent, unforeseen attention are likely to fall within the remit of sickness absence.

Utilising legal entitlements

There is no legal requirement placed on an employer to grant paid time off to attend medical appointments.

However, there are important aspects of other equality related legislation that can be used in making the case to an employer:

- Paid time off during normal working hours can be seen as a reasonable adjustment to prevent disadvantage to disabled employees under the 2010 Equality Act;
- 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;
- A pregnant employee (including a woman undergoing fertility treatment from the point of the implantation of fertilised ova) is legally entitled to take time off work with pay during normal working hours to attend ante-natal appointments;
- The woman's partner too has a right to time off on up to two occasions to attend ante-natal appointments for a maximum of 6.5 hours each, although there is currently no legal requirement for employer to grant paid time-off.

Extending the right to paid time off for all medical and dental appointments and screenings will inevitably encourage employees to take up opportunities to improve and maintain their health and avoid sickness absence.

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 you 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) treatment
- gender reassignment treatment
- 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 disability or medical condition.

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.

Further information

UNISON factsheets and guidance on related issues:

- [Women's health – a workplace issue](#)
- [Women's mental health – not to be ignored](#)

Available to download from the resources listed at www.unison.org.uk/women

- [Making sickness absence policies work better for us: a guide for UNISON branches](#) - stock number 2594

Available to download or order from the UNISON online catalogue at www.unison.org.uk/onlinecatalogue

- [Disability leave factsheet](#)
- [Model agreement on disability leave](#)
- [UNISON guidance on disability leave and disability related issues](#)

Available to download from the resources listed at www.unison.org.uk/disabledmembers

If you have any further queries about any of the issues raised in this factsheet, please contact the UNISON Bargaining Support Group at bsg@unison.co.uk