



Prepare for Flu Season with a Sick Policy Checkup! Template CDC Letter Included

Background

Once a year, most of us visit our health care provider for an annual checkup to make sure we are healthy. HR Knowledge recommends conducting a checkup on your Sick Policy to ensure a healthy work environment. An effective Sick Policy not only ensures compliance with federal, state, and local laws, but also gives employees enough time to recover and prevent others from getting sick. As the flu season lingers on, there are many ways you can leverage your Sick Policy to encourage a healthy workforce.

Updating your Sick Policy

We recommend reviewing your existing Sick Policy to ensure it is at least as generous as the federal, state, or local laws. The federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) entitles eligible employees who work for covered employers to take unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family and medical reasons. Employers covered under FMLA generally include private employers with 50 or more employees, or public or private elementary or secondary schools. Many states have also adopted paid sick leave, which in most cases can help cover employers and employees who are otherwise ineligible under FMLA, either because the employer is not large enough, their condition is not considered a serious medical condition, or they don't meet the hours worked and tenure to qualify.

Some important details to include in a Sick Policy include how much leave can be used each year, the rate at which the leave is accrued, when the leave accrual begins, how much leave is carried over to the following year, what purposes the employee can use the leave for, and more. For multi-state employers, make sure your policy is universal and consistent with all required Earned Sick Leave laws. If a universal policy cannot be adopted, consider including state-specific policies for each state in which the employee works.

There are a number of ways to prevent employees from abusing sick leave. For example, document and track absences for patterns such as taking sick time before or after holidays or weekends. Have your employees follow a consistent call-out procedure and collect doctors' notes where applicable. We also recommend considering a paid time off policy, which incorporates all types of time off — vacation, sick, and personal time — into one single bank of time. This discourages employees from feeling the need to use all their annual paid sick time, whether they are sick or not.

Consider telecommuting, or allowing employees to work from home, using the internet, email, and phone. The benefits of telecommuting include fostering a healthy office where employees do not feel pressure to come in to work if they are sick. It can also lessen the pressure on employees and improve morale.

However, keep in mind telecommuting may not be possible for all roles, and you will need to ensure you can still track the time properly for your non-exempt employees.

Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), any productive work for nonexempt employees must be compensated. It may be difficult to tell if a nonexempt employee has spent all their hours working while at home. Nonworked hours from home do not need to be compensated, but nonexempt employees must be able to track their time, punching in for worked time and out for nonworked time.



Telecommuting can also cause a decreased quality of work if employees are significantly sick, and it can also extend their illness if they are not getting the rest they need. Finally, working from home can be perceived as unfair if not all employees are given the option.

How to keep a healthy work environment during flu season

Invest in supplies that prevent the spread of infection, such as hand sanitizer, tissues, cleaning products, and no-touch trash cans. Train your employees on healthy work behaviors such as proper handwashing, keeping their workspaces clean, and wiping down shared items like phones, copiers, doorknobs, keyboards, and break areas.

The CDC always recommends that employees stay home if they have flu symptoms, until at least 24 hours after the fever breaks, to prevent exposure. We recommend using the CDC template letter to send to all employees, encouraging them to stay home if they have flu symptoms. Visit www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/toolkit.html to view more flu information to share with employees. Here is a sample letter, which you can customize to your company's needs:

“If you are not feeling well . . .

Do you have a fever or chills AND a cough or sore throat?

If “yes,” you may have the flu. Symptoms of flu include fever or chills and cough or sore throat. In addition, symptoms of flu can include runny nose, body aches, headache, tiredness, diarrhea, or vomiting.

Please do NOT come to work if you are sick with a fever AND cough or sore throat.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that sick employees stay home if they are sick with a flu-like illness until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever (100 degrees Fahrenheit or 38 degrees Celsius) or signs of a fever (have chills, feel very warm, have a flushed appearance, or are sweating). This should be determined without the use of fever-reducing medicines (any medicine that contains ibuprofen or acetaminophen).

If you are at higher risk for complications from the flu and you are sick, contact your health care provider as soon as possible. Children younger than five years of age, pregnant women, people of any age with chronic medical conditions (such as pulmonary disease, asthma, diabetes, neuromuscular disorders, or heart disease), and people 65 years of age and older are more likely to get complications from the flu. Your health care provider may prescribe antiviral drugs, and these are most effective when started within two days of getting sick.

*In addition, emergency warning signs that the sick person needs **urgent medical attention** include:*

- *Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath*
- *Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen*
- *Sudden dizziness*
- *Confusion*



- *Severe or persistent vomiting*
- *Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and a worse cough*

Contact *[insert name, telephone, email]* if you have any questions.

For information about caring for someone sick with the flu, visit www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance_homecare.htm.

For more information, visit www.flu.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636).

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