

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Are You Too Sick to Go to Work?

When are you too sick to go to work? As you think about what to do, it's important to consider both your own health and the health of co-workers who might catch your illness if you go to work.

Staying home when you're sick

No matter how miserable you feel, you may wonder if it really makes sense to stay home from work. After all, you might be able to get some work done even if you're coughing, sneezing, or sniffling. There are several good reasons to stay home when you're sick.

You may give your illness to co-workers. Colds and flu usually spread through the droplets released when someone coughs or sneezes. They can also spread through contact with an object handled by an infected person. Cold and flu viruses can live for two hours or more on items such as desks, doorknobs, computer keyboards, and cafeteria tables, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). So you may give your illness to many others if you share a phone or fax machine, or handle papers that will be touched by co-workers or clients. Remember to wash your hands frequently and effectively as they are the primary source of spreading germs.

"Working sick" can be dangerous. Many tasks that are usually safe can be risky if you have an illness that significantly weakens you or your ability to concentrate. Some obvious examples are operating machinery, driving a truck, and lifting heavy objects. But almost any job can be risky if you're too sick or tired to maintain good workplace safety habits. The drive to work itself might be dangerous, particularly if you are taking medications that cause drowsiness.

Your condition may get worse if you don't take care of yourself.A cold is usually at its worst for only a few days; getting through the flu may take a week to ten days (though you may feel weak for a week or two longer). But if you don't take care of yourself, you may develop secondary illnesses due to a lowered resistance. Not allowing yourself to get over one illness may weaken your body's response to another infection. The risks of complications from "routine" illnesses may increase if you have a chronic condition such as heart disease, asthma, or diabetes.

You'll be less productive at work. You won't be at your best if you're sick (especially if an illness has kept you from getting enough sleep). If you're taking prescription or over-the-counter medications to ease your symptoms, remember that medications can affect people in different ways. Some products may make you feel drowsy or less alert. You also risk making mistakes that might be costly to your team, your clients, or to your reputation at work.

Ways to tell if you're healthy enough to go to work

When you're trying to decide whether you're healthy enough to go to work, your body may send you mixed signals. You may look fine in the mirror, but feel sicker than you have in years. Or you may look awful but know it's not because you're sick—it's because you had a restless night for some other reason. To some extent, you'll need to use good judgment about whether to go to work. Here are some things to consider:

Ask yourself if you would send your child to school or child care with the symptoms you have.

Ask yourself if you would want your co-worker to be working near you with the same symptoms.

Always pay attention to unusual symptoms. Watch for signs that you may have something more than a cold or flu. For example, the symptoms of conjunctivitis or “pink eye” include matted eyelashes and bright pink eyes with significant amounts of white or yellow discharge at the corners. This disease is highly contagious and, if you go to work, may spread rapidly among your co-workers.

Pay extra attention to your health if you feel like you are “coming down with something.”Go to bed a half hour earlier and get up a half hour earlier to give yourself more time to see how you feel before going to work. If you usually get up late and get ready for work in a rush, you may make a hasty judgment that you’ll regret later in the day. Get up a little earlier, and you’ll have more time to see how you feel.

Be honest about how much time you will need to devote to being ill while at work. For example, if you are having nausea, will you need to make frequent bathroom trips that will take you away from meetings or your desk? Will you be able to be around others who are eating or drinking without feeling like you are going to be ill?

Talk with your health care provider about what to do.

Other issues to consider when calling in sick

When deciding whether to call in sick, you may also find it helpful to consider the following:

Be familiar with your employer’s policy regarding time off for an illness. For example, do you need a doctor's note? Be aware as well of how much time off you have taken through the year and for what reasons.

Find out from your manager if you can work from home for a half or full day (if your job permits).

Consider current business needs and how your absence will affect others.

If you have concerns, talk with your manager or HR about the best way to handle the situation.

Calling in sick

If you do have to miss work, it’s important to follow your company policies.

Know how your manager wants you to call in sick. Find out if your manager wants you to call a specific number, specific people, or to call in by a certain time. Also, find out if you need to provide a replacement for your position or someone to take over work that is due.

Make the call yourself. Don’t ask someone else to call in for you. Making the call yourself shows that you take responsibility for your work. Be clear and to the point: “I have a bad cold, so I’m going to stay home today.”

Call in as soon as you know you’re going to stay home. This gives your manager the maximum amount of time to find someone to perform any tasks that have to be done that day. If you expect your illness will keep you home for more than a day, say so. This will help your manager plan for your absence.

Follow company absence reporting procedures. Failure to do so could impact any salary continuation that you may be eligible for within your company’s disability insurance plan.

Let your supervisor know what you are doing to recuperate. If you have a doctor’s appointment, tell her so that she understands that you are doing what you can to return to work as soon as you are physically able to do so.
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Making sure you and others stay healthy at work

When you're healthy enough to go to work, you'll want to make sure that you and others stay that way.

Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Don't cough directly into your hands. This is how germs spread. If you can, cough into your elbow. This keeps your hands from becoming loaded with germs that will pass easily to others. Use disposable tissues and throw them away afterward.

Wash your hands frequently. Use soap and warm water if possible. The CDC recommends that you wash for about 20 seconds, or the amount of time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice. If you can't wash with soap and water, use alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers. (These don't need water to be effective.) Keep a bottle of gel sanitizer at your desk and in your car, using it before you touch your face or mouth, or eat.

Take precautions if a co-worker seems ill. If a co-worker is coughing or sneezing, you might say, "I'm concerned about getting sick. Maybe we shouldn't use the same phone today." Or "Let's put off our lunch date until next week."

Keep your distance from co-workers and others if you suspect you may be coming down with something. It's OK to ask your manager to excuse you from a meeting or from tasks that involve a lot of contact with others if you think you may be getting sick.

Staying healthy

If you often have an itchy, runny nose or watery eyes, talk with your doctor to find out if you have allergies. Colds and allergies can have similar symptoms. But there are important differences: Colds are contagious, and allergies aren't. And although you can't cure a cold, you may be able to reduce allergy problems by taking medication or avoiding substances that cause a reaction.

Maintain good health habits. Exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet, limit your alcohol consumption, avoid use of tobacco products, and get enough sleep. If you drink too much or sleep too little, you may feel awful because you're sleep deprived.

Consult your health care provider if you frequently feel too sick to go to work. You may have an underlying condition that needs attention.

Stay hydrated. Drinking lots of water helps prevent dehydration. If possible, keep a water bottle at your desk, and try to finish it while you're working. Drinking water helps prevent nasal congestion due to dry indoor heat.

Stay up to date on recommended immunizations, including the seasonal flu vaccine. Recommendations for your age are available at **www.canada.ca**.

If you'd like more information on colds, flu, and other common illnesses, visit the website for the **CDC**. This site is updated frequently and has extensive information on a wide variety of health concerns, including both practical advice and late-breaking news bulletins on topics such as the availability of flu vaccine. Your company website may also offer health-related information.

Finally, remember that you can get colds and flu in any season. All year long, it's important to do everything you can to protect your health and the health of co-workers.