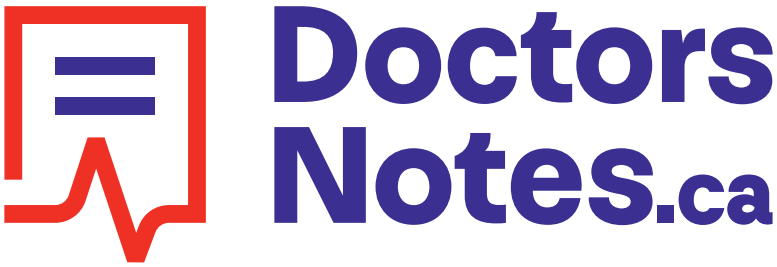

HR Toolkit

Effectively Managing Absences without Sick Notes

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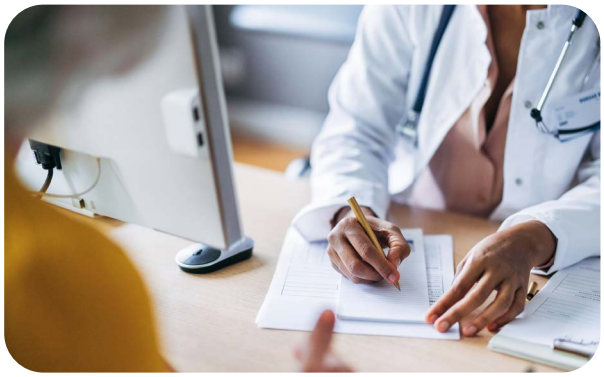

This toolkit is presented by Doctors Manitoba and CPHR Manitoba. The purpose is to assist Human Resource professionals and employers of all types with effectively managing absenteeism without sick notes.

Acknowledgements

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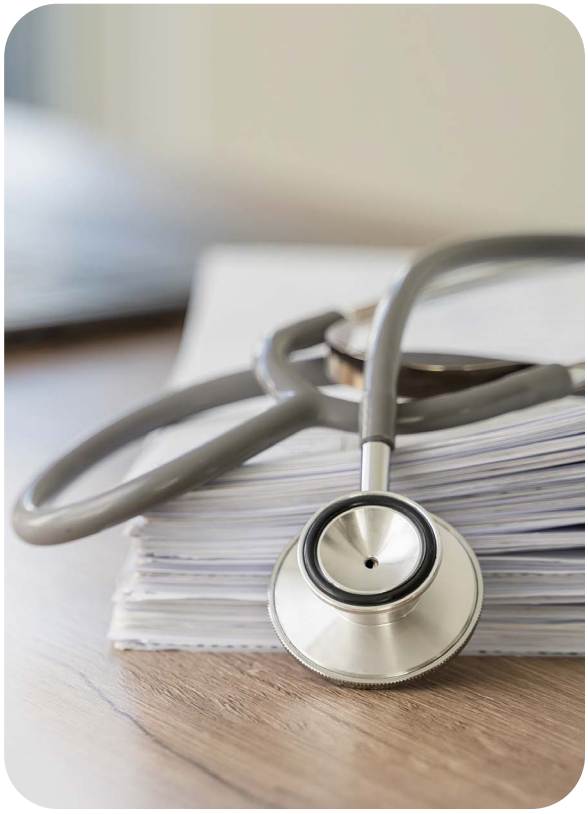
Doctors Manitoba

CPHR Manitoba

Introduction

Sick notes are restricted in Manitoba effective October 1, 2026.



Everyone faces minor illnesses or injuries from time to time, and sometimes that means employees call in sick to work. As an employer, you have an important role in supporting the health and well-being of your employees, but you also need to ensure that you have the staffing resources needed to run your organization day to day.

Workforce absenteeism can affect productivity, service delivery, and workplace morale. Yet not all absences are created equally. Understanding the distinction between culpable and non-culpable absenteeism is essential for managing attendance fairly and effectively.

Workplaces range significantly in how they approach requirements and policies related to sick days. Historically, many workplaces required employees to visit a doctor and provide medical verification that they were ill and unable to work (a "sick note"). As this toolkit will explain, sick notes are not an effective way to manage sick leaves in a workplace and may provide a false form of verification. Importantly, sick notes also contribute to the significant strain on doctors and the health system as a whole.

Recognizing this, the Manitoba government now restricts sick notes to limited situations, similar to most other provinces and territories. Employers are encouraged to go above and beyond the minimum standards set in legislation to eliminate sick notes completely for short term illness verification and adopt better policies for sick leave and absenteeism management. By eliminating sick note requirements for short-term minor illnesses, businesses can build stronger workplaces while helping to ensure that health resources are available to those who need them most.

This toolkit will provide tips and resources for employers to adopt modern and proven approaches to managing absenteeism that align with both operational needs and employee well-being.

What Exactly is a Sick Note

A sick note is a document to verify an illness or injury resulting in a short-term absence from work, school, or other institution. Sick notes serve the sole purpose of verification.

Sick notes do not refer to instances where detailed medical advice is important and necessary and can be essential to facilitate safe and timely return-to-work. This can include documents such as accommodation forms, protected extended leave verifications, functional abilities forms, return-to-work documentation, or requirements related to insurance coverage, disability applications, and benefits. These are examples of valid doctors' notes or medical certificates, not sick notes.

This toolkit is about supporting employers in updating policies and practices to manage illness or injury-related absences without relying on sick notes.

Why Sick Notes Aren't Helpful

Historically, many employers used sick notes to verify that employees were sick and unable to work. However, research has shown that sick notes are generally not an effective tool for meeting that goal and can have negative unintended consequences. Consider these key facts about sick notes:

They don't work.

Sick notes aren't effective for verifying illness. More than a third of the time, patients often don't have symptoms left to check when they see a doctor. They are a false form of verification.

They risk workplace infections.

People with minor illnesses or injuries often only need to stay home to rest and recover – not risk infecting others at work or clinic waiting rooms. Research shows 82% of workers would rather go to work sick than get a

They can decrease productivity.

Aside from the risk of workplace spread of infections, requiring sick notes rather than focusing on rest and recovery sometimes extends the recovery period. Sick note policies also have the potential to decrease trust and engagement in the workplace.

They add to wait times.

Several medical groups are calling for the elimination of sick notes so that doctors can see more patients. If sick notes were eliminated in Manitoba, over 300,000 doctors' visits could be freed up. That's the equivalent of adding 50 doctors to our province.

We all pay for them.

A third of the time patients see a doctor and get a sick note, they don't need any medical care. That means sick notes cost Manitoba taxpayers an estimated $8 million per year for these unnecessary medical visits. Plus, many workers have to pay out of pocket for a sick note as an uninsured service, and many employers reimburse them.

Requiring a sick note, especially when symptoms can't be verified by the doctor, can ultimately limit employers' options on attendance management in the long run. Additionally, employers must process and track these notes, dedicating resources on administrative tasks rather than focusing on broader workplace culture and attendance strategies.

The following scenarios demonstrate these challenges:

Scenario 1:

John missed two days of work earlier in the week due to a fever and minor flu symptoms. His employer asked him to provide a sick note to verify his illness. John got in to see his doctor the next day and they provided a note based solely on John's report of his symptoms and illness.

In this situation, the symptoms are no longer present, and the physician will rely on the patient's account of their experience. There is no medical value to this interaction, and the employer receives no further verification than what they received from the employee.

Scenario 2:

Mohinder spent the night vomiting from a virus that had been circulating at his daughter's daycare. He woke up feeling slightly better, but exhausted and dehydrated. He called his employer to say he was unable to come to work. His employer said he needed to provide a sick note to verify his illness. Mohinder was unable to get in to see his family doctor that day, so he took the bus to a walk-in clinic and waited three hours to be seen. He saw a doctor who advised him to rest and drink fluids, provided him with a note, and charged him $30. Mohinder was unable to spend his sick day recovering and ended up needing to call in sick again the next day to get the rest he needed.

In this situation, the sick note requirement created a barrier to the employee's recovery and prolonged his absence from work. It also cost him money and time unnecessarily as there was no need for

Scenario 3:

Jane has a cold. She is congested, coughing, and exhausted. She calls in sick to work, and her employer says she must provide a sick note. She does not have a family doctor and does not want to wait in the clinic for her minor illness that does not require medical attention. She decides to go to work. A few days later two of her colleagues took sick days due to the colds they got from Jane.

In this situation, the sick note requirement discouraged the employee from taking necessary sick time, affecting the health of other employees, and creating a broader operational impact on the workplace with the spread of illness.

Moving away from sick note policies creates a win-win-win:

Good for Manitobans

- Better access to care
- Rest and recover when sick
- Eliminate hassle and expense of getting sick notes

Good for Employers

- Improved productivity
- Better employee engagement and trust
- Shift to better and proven methods to manage absenteeism

Good for Doctors

- Reduced administrative burden and burnout
- More time for patient care
- Less spread of illness
- Better allocation of time and resources

Manitoba Sick Time Guidelines

In Manitoba, *The Employment Standards Code* (scan QR Code →) outlines the rights and responsibilities of most employees and employers in the province (approximately 90%). outlines the rights and responsibilities of most employees and employers in the province (approximately 90%). The Code has been updated by the government to eliminate sick notes in most situations.

Sick Note Restrictions in Manitoba

The Manitoba government has passed legislation that eliminates sick notes in most situations, following consensus reached by the Labour Management Review Committee (scan QR Code →). The rules prohibit employers from requiring sick notes for:

- Absences of up to 7 calendar days or less, or
- Fewer than 10 cumulative workdays in a calendar year.

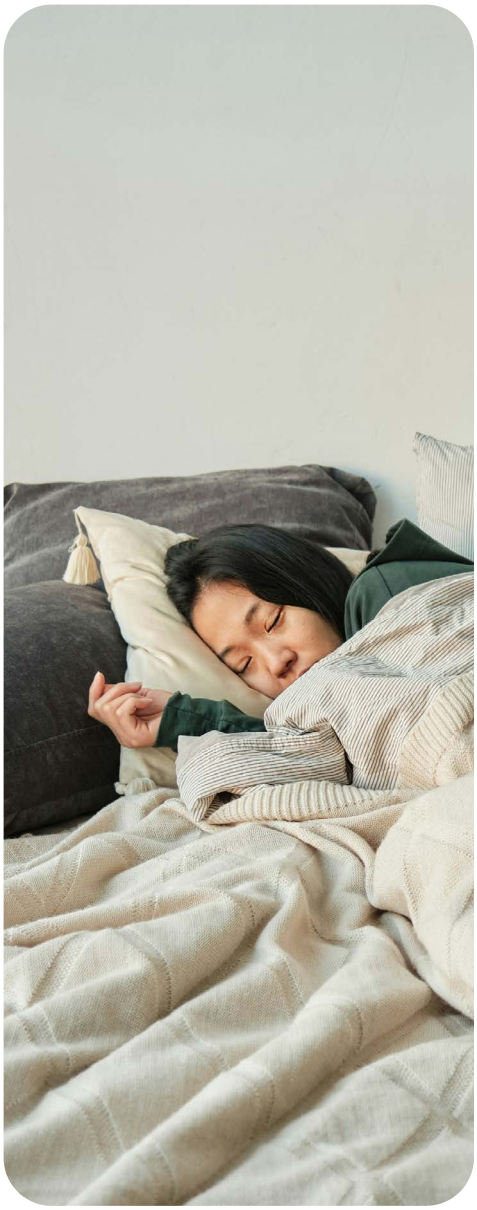
After this, an employer has the option to request a sick note. These rules do not limit when medical certificates are required for long term leaves (e.g. parental leave), nor for medical reports required to inform safe work plans, disability eligibility, accommodations, etc.

In federally regulated sectors, the Canada Labour Code outlines minimum standards that limit employers from requesting sick notes.

Regardless of the current or minimum legislated standards that apply for your organization, the best practice is to eliminate the use of sick notes to verify short-term absences related to illness or injury.

Legislative rules and requirements can change over time. As an employer, it is essential that you remain up-to-date and aware of employees' rights, applicable laws, and employment/collective agreements provisions.

Read more about *Manitoba's Employment Standards* by scanning the QR Code →.



Culpable vs. Non-Culpable Absenteeism: A Critical Distinction

Employers must differentiate between two types of absenteeism. Culpable absenteeism refers to absences that are within an employee's control, such as excessive lateness, lack of a legitimate reason for leave, or misrepresented illness. In these cases, employers can take corrective action through coaching, progressive discipline, performance management, or training interventions to address patterns of misuse.

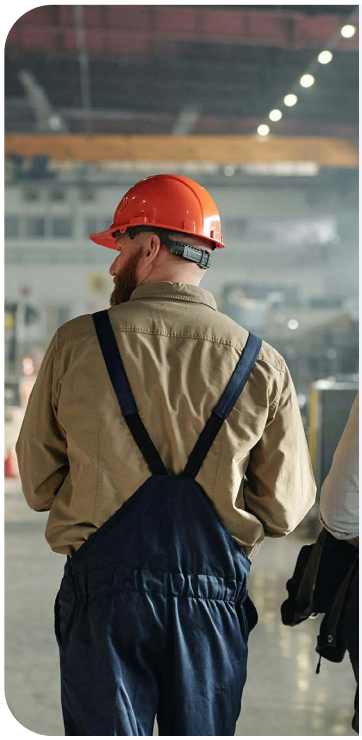
Non-culpable absenteeism, on the other hand, includes legitimate, unavoidable absences due to illness, injury, or disability. These instances require employers to approach the situation with an emphasis on accommodation, medical support, and effective workplace policies. Employers must strike a balance between holding employees accountable and recognizing legitimate health-related needs, ensuring fairness, transparency, and compliance with employment standards legislation.

Best Practices for Managing Sick Time

Building a healthy and successful workplace is essential for effectively managing sick leave and other personal absences. Engagement, connection, and trust help to support both productive and effective workplaces and mitigate potential issues.

This means transitioning away from outdated practices like sick notes, which are ineffective at verifying sick-related absences and can reinforce a more antagonistic workplace culture rather than one built on trust and engagement.

Here are some tips for effectively managing sick time and minimizing the risk of misuse of sick leaves, without the use of sick notes.



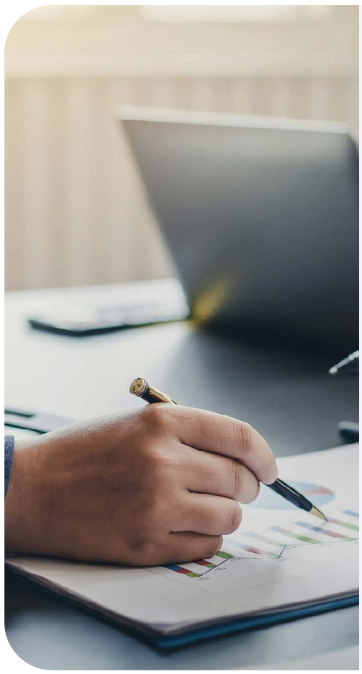
1. Build a Strong Organizational Culture

Putting time and energy into a healthy workplace culture is an investment in your workplace's future and success. Trust and communication are foundational building blocks for supporting strong and motivated teams. Workplace leaders have an important role in building a positive culture of trust by ongoing deliberate actions. This can include:

Open communication – As much as possible, create regular opportunities for dialogue and feedback from employees. Be transparent about your organization's goals and challenges and be open to comments and suggestions received.

Respect and recognition – Foster a respectful environment where every employee feels valued and you recognize employees for their contributions.

Lead by example – Leaders can help build a culture of integrity and transparency by acknowledging issues or challenges and taking responsibility for outcomes.



2. Implement a Clear Sick Leave Policy

Having a clear sick leave policy aligned with your workplace needs is key to effective absence management. Please refer to Attachment 1 included in this toolkit for a policy template.

As your organization considers how best to implement a new sick leave policy, or to amend an existing one, think about the workplace culture you are trying to create or maintain. Also consider how employee absences and related policies affect job satisfaction and morale to create a policy that best suits your organization.

An effective sick leave policy should clearly lay out:

- Overall expectations for employees and managers;
- If/how employees are paid for sick time;
- Notice requirements and mechanisms (e.g. email, text, call); and
- Procedures for recording absences.

3. Eliminate Sick Notes and Adopt Proven Alternatives

Sick notes were historically used by employers as a tool to verify that an employee is absent from work for a valid illness or injury. As outlined earlier in the toolkit, sick notes are often not effective at meeting this objective, and can have unintended negative consequences for employees, workplaces, doctors, and the health system as a whole.

There are many alternative approaches that your organization should consider implementing to help manage sick time more effectively:

Trust for Short Absences

Employers can choose to trust employees for short sick leave periods without requiring sick notes or any other evidence unless there is suspicion of misuse. Doing so can help to reinforce an overall culture of workplace trust and communication.

Self-Attestations

Employees can easily provide a signed attestation explaining their illness or injury, avoiding the hassle and expense of obtaining a sick note. This method offers employers equal or greater benefits compared to sick notes, as it creates a record that can be referenced if the validity of the leave is later questioned. In cases of misuse, a false self-attestation serves as documented evidence for potential disciplinary actions. Conversely, if an employee provides a sick note validated by a doctor, it can be more challenging for employers to address any discrepancies. Please see Attachment 2 for a sample self-attestation form that your organization could adopt.

Flexible or Paid Leave Days

Providing employees with sick leave days, flexible wellness days or personal leave days that do not require a sick note can help to enhance workplace culture by recognizing that illness or similar unexpected circumstances do come up for employees. Allowing flexible time off for illness, especially paid time off, can help protect the health and safety of your employees, and support business continuity by reducing cases where workers come in sick and spread illness. Such policies also greatly help to support recruitment and retention, providing overall benefits to your organization.

Track Absences Systematically

Organizations can leverage their payroll or human resources information systems, or manually review records every month or quarter, to identify outliers with high rates of sick time. Suspicious cases or trends could trigger further review or investigation.

Investigate Suspicious Absences

Most employees behave appropriately and responsibly at work and should be trusted. However, if you notice a pattern of repeated or suspicious absences (such as routine sick calls around long weekends), you can take steps to review and address this behavior. This may involve supporting a supervisor to engage the employee about their pattern of sick time. It could involve asking the employee to check-in regularly with updates or a return-to-work interview as needed.

Request Alternate Forms of Evidence

Employees could be asked for alternative evidence that is flexible and reasonable for their circumstance, such as receipts for hospital parking, prescriptions, or purchased medical equipment, confirmation notices for medical appointments, or an accident report in the case of injury. It is possible the employee has a chronic condition with recurring periodic symptoms, which could be approached with a flexible accommodation rather than policing it as sick time.

4. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

No matter what approach and requirements you have in place, sick leave policies and expectations should be communicated and consistently reinforced by managers and employees. This is particularly important in cases where there is a new or amended policy. Expectations and policies can be incorporated into employment agreements, employee handbooks or other internal resources, and/or communicated through emails, newsletters, and staff meetings.

See more on addressing misuse of sick leave in the FAQ section on the next page, as well as sample scripts for supervisors in the linked resources on the last page of this toolkit. Templates for additional resources to support transitioning from sick note requirements are included in this toolkit, including drafts of posters and messages to managers and staff that can be customized to your organization's needs.

Conclusion

Managing sick time and employee absences is an essential part of any workplace. By shifting towards trust-based, data-driven, and wellness-focused attendance management, employers can build healthier workplaces, improve service delivery, and support the well-being of both employees and the broader community.

The resources in this toolkit are intended to give an overview of best practices to support positive and healthy workplaces, and to manage sick leaves without the use of sick notes, which have been shown to be ineffective for employers and a high burden on limited health care resources.

Sick note alternatives, such as self-attestation forms, can provide equal or even better assurance to employers that leaves are valid and that they have the necessary documentation to address situations of misuse.

Thank you for your important role in supporting the health and well-being of your employees and for contributing to improved healthcare services for all.

Further Support

If you need further support to update your HR policies and practices related to absenteeism, work with your in-house human resources department or contact a chartered professional in human resources. Two local Manitoba firms offer excellent independent human resource support and expertise:

TIPI Legacy HR+

tipilegacy.ca

PEOPLE FIRST HR SERVICES
A division of People Corporation

peoplefirsthr.com

FAQs

1. How do I handle a situation where an employee is suspected of misusing sick time?

Start by assuming good faith. Most employees use sick time responsibly, and approaching the issue with trust and empathy often resolves concerns before they escalate. If you notice a recurring pattern, such as absences that frequently occur around weekends or major deadlines, document the dates and begin a conversation with the employee when they return to work. See sample scripts in our resources section.

These check-ins don't need to be disciplinary. Instead, position them as a chance to understand the employee's situation and clarify expectations. Return-to-work conversations are a helpful tool, offering an opportunity to assess if there's an underlying issue, such as a health condition, workplace conflict, or disengagement. If concerns persist despite this dialogue, ensure your sick leave policy includes a clear framework for escalating concerns, such as requesting a self-attestation form, follow-up documentation, or a formal performance discussion. Being consistent, respectful, and clear is key to maintaining trust while addressing potential misuse.

2. What if I suspect a pattern of misuse but don't want to be punitive?

Employers often want to address concerning absence patterns without damaging morale or appearing accusatory. A non-punitive approach begins with building a culture of openness and accountability. If you're concerned about a potential pattern, start by tracking absences in a confidential and non-judgmental way. Keep records of dates, duration, and any reasons provided.

Then, speak with the employee in a one-on-one meeting. Express your observations factually and invite them to share more context. For example: "I've noticed you've called in sick several Mondays in the last few months. Is everything okay?" Framing it this way shows you're open to hearing their side, and allows you to explore whether there's a personal, health-related, or environmental factor contributing to the pattern.

Using self-attestation forms and return-to-work interviews can help reinforce expectations without defaulting to punitive measures. This approach also creates opportunities to identify and resolve deeper issues early, such as burnout, caregiving responsibilities, or workplace culture issues.

3. Will removing sick note requirements lead to more absenteeism?

It's a common concern, but evidence from organizations and jurisdictions that have eliminated sick note requirements shows no increased rates of absenteeism. In fact, many employers report improvements in attendance, employee engagement, and overall workplace trust when the removal of sick note requirements is positioned as part of the organization's effort to improve morale and engagement. When employees feel respected and trusted, they are more likely to use sick time responsibly and less likely to disengage or misuse leave.

Requiring sick notes for short-term illness can actually create more disruption. Employees may take more time off to obtain documentation, or worse, come to work while still unwell to avoid the hassle or cost, increasing the risk of spreading illness to others.

A trust-based approach, supported by clear policies, regular communication, and practical tools like self-attestation forms, can maintain accountability while reducing unnecessary administrative burden and promoting a healthier, more resilient workplace.

4. How should I handle recurring short-term absences resulting from chronic health conditions?

Absences tied to a recurring or chronic health condition, such as migraines, asthma, or multiple sclerosis, are generally considered non-culpable absenteeism. These are not within the employees' control and must be approached from a human rights and duty-to-accommodate perspective. When you see a pattern of absences that appears health-related, start by checking in with the employee to express concern and offer support. Ask if there is anything the workplace can do to help. The employee may voluntarily disclose a medical condition, in which case you may ask for supporting documentation on the condition to help guide appropriate accommodations. This may include documentation outlining any restrictions or recommended changes to work arrangements or environment.

Accommodation might mean offering flexible scheduling, adjusting workload expectations, or allowing remote work. It's important to treat these cases individually, with compassion, and in compliance with employment law and human rights legislation. These conversations should be confidential and handled sensitively, with a focus on keeping the employee healthy and engaged at work. It is an employer's legal duty to accommodate medical needs (when supported by a medical professional), up to and including undue hardship.

5. What are the legal requirements related to illness, disability, and accommodation?

In Manitoba and across Canada, employers have a duty to accommodate employees with disabilities, including both permanent and temporary physical and mental health conditions, to the point of undue hardship. This duty is grounded in human rights law and applies to visible and invisible conditions, for example multiple sclerosis, recurring migraines, depression, and anxiety. It's important to keep in mind that over half of Manitobans have chronic diseases.

The accommodation process should be individualized, collaborative, and respectful. Employers can request documentation that outlines the nature of limitations or restrictions (but generally not a diagnosis) to help guide adjustments to work duties, schedules, or environments.

Accommodation is not about giving an advantage; it's about ensuring equal access and opportunity. Employers must also avoid actions that could be considered discriminatory, such as penalizing an employee for taking medically required leave. Always seek legal or HR guidance when navigating complex accommodation issues or when you're unsure how to balance operational needs with employee rights.

6. What if an employee requests sick time too frequently without explanation?

Frequent sick leave requests can be challenging to manage, especially when they aren't tied to any disclosed condition. However, frequent absences do not automatically mean misuse. It's essential to approach the situation with curiosity and neutrality.

Begin by reviewing your sick leave policy and ensuring it's being applied consistently across your organization. If the absences are short-term and infrequent but feel excessive overall, schedule a private conversation with the employee. You can say, "I've noticed you've used more sick time than average over the past few months, and I wanted to check in and see if there's anything going on."

This approach opens the door to honest discussion. There may be underlying health or personal issues at play. In some cases, it may prompt the employee to disclose a health condition or request support. In others, it may be a wake-up call that their attendance is being noticed. Use this conversation to reinforce expectations like self-attestation forms or return-to-work meetings to maintain consistency and fairness.

7. When is it appropriate to require a note from a medical professional?

While sick notes are not recommended for short-term or minor illnesses and injuries, there are still circumstances where medical advice is appropriate and useful. These include:

- When an employee requests a formal workplace accommodation under human rights legislation or an employer requests formal medical information as a part of their duty to accommodate;
- For return-to-work planning after a prolonged or serious illness or injury;
- When an employee is applying for disability benefits or insurance coverage; or
- When an employee is applying for a protected leave of absence (in some cases).

In these cases, a medical note can confirm limitations, restrictions, or necessary adjustments without disclosing a diagnosis. Unless the employee chooses to share more, employers should request the minimum necessary information to support workplace decisions that are directly related to their job, respecting privacy while ensuring a safe and productive work environment. When situations involve more complex accommodations, it may be appropriate for an employer to require more information about the diagnosis to appropriately assess an accommodation. Seek legal or HR guidance when navigating complex accommodation issues or when you're unsure how to balance operational needs with employee rights.

Note that the completion of medical notes and forms are "uninsured services" meaning that they are not paid for by Manitoba Health and there is generally a fee charged by the health care provider. Employers should establish clear policies on if and how they will cover the costs of medical notes.

Beyond medical notes, if an employee is off for an extended period it is also important to consider broader implications such as access to benefits, and requirements related to Records of Employment (ROE).

8. Can self-attestation forms be used in disciplinary or legal situations?

Yes. Self-attestation forms are a valid and practical way to document employee sick time and can be used as part of a progressive discipline process when necessary. They show that the employee has formally declared the reason for their absence, which can support accountability while maintaining trust.

If patterns of questionable absenteeism continue, self-attestations offer a consistent record to review. Because the employee has signed the form, knowingly providing false information can be addressed as a misconduct issue. In legal or arbitration settings, this documentation may be helpful in showing that the employer acted reasonably, transparently, and fairly when addressing absenteeism concerns.

Importantly, self-attestation systems must be applied consistently and supported by a clear sick leave policy outlining when and how the forms are used.

When managing disciplinary issues such as culpable or suspicious absenteeism, it's important to seek HR or legal guidance before taking action. Always ensure that employees are treated with respect and that due diligence is followed in compliance with employment and human rights laws.

9. How do I communicate changes to our sick leave policy with employees?

Effective communication is key to successfully implementing any workplace policy, especially one related to employee health and attendance. Start by preparing a clear and accessible summary of the policy, explaining what's changing and why. Emphasize that the change is designed to support employee well-being, ensure compliance with applicable laws, reduce unnecessary health care visits, and improve workplace trust.

Use multiple communication channels:

- A written policy update via email or your HR platform;
- Team meetings or town halls to discuss the changes in person;
- Manager toolkits or talking points to ensure consistency in messaging.

Allow time for questions and feedback, and provide examples (e.g., when a self-attestation is used, when a note might still be needed). Reinforce that the policy reflects a modern, respectful approach to managing illness and attendance, and that it still includes tools to ensure fairness and accountability.

10. Who do I contact with more questions or support?

If you need support implementing or interpreting your sick leave policy, consider reaching out to:

- Your internal HR team or external consultants and experts
- An external HR consulting firm
- The Manitoba Employment Standards Branch for information on the Employment Standards Code
- Employment lawyers for advice on complex cases involving human rights or disciplinary issues.

Additional Resources

You can also refer to the additional resources included in the online toolkit, including template policies, self-attestation forms, and sample communication materials. Don't hesitate to seek support. Getting your policy right helps build a healthier and more productive workplace for everyone. Scan the QR code → or visit **DoctorsNotes.ca/toolkit#furthersupport**

External Resources

Explore a compilation of external resources and guidelines. Scan QR Code → or visit **DoctorsNotes.ca/toolkit#externalresources**

Refer to the **Absence Management Flow Chart** on the next page when navigating employee absences.

Absence Management Flow Chart

Work Day 1

Employee Notification

Notify supervisor of absence, including expected return to work date (if known) and the reason for the absence. Follow internal instructions about notification (e.g. phone, email, text, etc.).

Employer Action

Ensure all information is submitted by employee and document the absence.

Consider self-attestation form if...

- Employee is expected to be absent for 3+ days.
- Employee has a concerning pattern of absences.
- Employee has used up allotted sick days for year.

Consider return-to-work check-in if...

- Employee discloses injury or illness that might require a supported or graduated return.
- Employee is expected to be away for 10+ days.

Work Days 2–5

Employee Provides Updates

Employees have a duty to keep their supervisor updated on any changes to their absence including their date of return.

Employer Action

- Document any changes to absence
- Request self-attestation form if needed (as per above)
- Consider return-to-work check-in if appropriate (as per above).
- If closer monitoring of the absence is needed, consider requesting other documentation (but not a sick note), and/or consider having the employee call in daily with updates.

Work Days 6–10

Employee Provides Updates

Keep supervisor updated on any changes, respond to supervisor inquiries in a timely way.

Employer Action

- Document any changes.
- Consider if any of the actions above are necessary.

Work Days 11+

Employee Provides Updates

Keep supervisor updated on any changes, respond to supervisor inquiries in a timely way.

Employer Action

- Document any changes.
- Assess if the illness or injury will require a longer absence, encouraging employee to seek medical assessment, if appropriate, to understand if a return-to-work plan will be needed and/or an accommodation.
- Discuss support options (EAP, community resources, HR policies for longer medical leaves, etc.)