



Returning to Work after Sickness

What is a return to work questionnaire?

A return to work questionnaire is a simple medical declaration that workers complete following a bout of sickness, absence and sometimes foreign holidays.

Owners of businesses have a legal responsibility to take action to avoid the risk of contaminating food. Whilst it may be relatively straightforward for a business to control what goes on within its walls, it is relatively powerless to control activities that occur away from the business.

By requiring workers to complete a declaration of their medical condition when they return to work following absence, the owner/manager of a food business has shown to have suitably investigated a possible threat of contamination.

The completion of a declaration by a worker is only the first step, however. The owner/manager must ensure they review the declaration and take appropriate action such as excluding the worker from food preparation until medical clearance has been given

What illnesses are of concern?

In simple terms a worker should report any illness that could be spread through contact with other workers or through contact with food. These illnesses usually involve infection from viruses or bacteria.

It is not necessary for the worker to know the actual diagnosed illness they may have rather they should recognise the symptoms.

These would normally be:

- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Discharge from gums/mouth, ears or eyes
- A sore throat with fever
- A re-occurring bowel disorder
- A re-occurring skin ailment

These symptoms should cover all likely illnesses that could pose a threat to food safety

Foreign Travel

It is very common for illnesses to be picked up whilst on holiday abroad. In most cases individuals will treat themselves with over the counter medication to control symptoms. Workers need to be aware that they may return from trips abroad still carrying the illness. The worker should report this situation to the owner/manager. Exclusion from work may still be required if the owner/ manager suspects that the worker may still contaminate food or infect others.

What is meant by exclusion from work?

This basically means that a worker is not permitted to conduct their usual work duties. This should not be seen as a punishment; rather that it is a responsible action to take to prevent contamination of food, workers or the public.

Being absent from work is undesirable for the business and owners appreciate continuous attendance, particularly in small scale businesses with few employees. However, this can encourage workers to attend their place of work even when they shouldn't.

What is medical clearance to return to work?

Medical clearance usually means that a doctor has been consulted to assess whether an individual is safe to return to the workplace.

This however can be a time-consuming process and being able to see a doctor can take a number of days. Therefore, there is another option that can be taken.

For cases of vomiting and diarrhoea:

Vomiting and diarrhoea present the greatest risk to contaminating food. However, they do not necessarily mean the individual is gravely ill.

For some years now it has been accepted that a worker can return to work 48 after symptoms have stopped specifically in the case of any gastro-intestinal infections. If the individual has taken medication the 48 hours starts after medication was last taken.

It is advised that you inform your manager/supervisor if someone in your immediate family has any of the symptoms.

- **Definition**

Gastro-intestinal This refers to the stomach and intestines, sometimes referred to as the gut or digestive system.

Other illnesses:

Skin ailments, discharge from mouth, ears or eyes and conditions causing fever usually have to be treated with prescribed medication therefore the 48-hour rule should not be applied.

What documentation is required?

A business needs to have a formal way of recording fitness to work. This is not to be confused with a medical statement from a doctor. This form is used by the business, its workers and either managers or owners to certify individuals suitability to work.

What should happen to this form once completed?

The form should be reviewed by the manager/owner and then the worker aloud back to normal duties. However, if the 48-hour period has not been reached or there is concern then further professional opinions or certification of “fit for work” should be sort.

All return to work questionnaires must be kept on file for a minimum of 12 months. This will ensure that they are available to view by your local Environmental Health Officer (EHO) during their routine annual visits.

Return to work questionnaires will be used by an EHO if they have to investigate an incident of food poisoning that has been reported to them that implicates your business.

What is important to remember is that this is a legal statement and can be used as evidence in prosecutions. However, not having such documentation means you have no “due diligence” in place and therefore you have no defence should a case of food poisoning be proved against you.

Key points

A return to work questionnaire is an essential part of controlling food safety

- All workers must be made aware of the need to report illness that could cause illness in others.
- Workers must be 48 hours symptom free without the use of medication prior to returning to work
- All workers must know that a return to work form must be completed before resuming work
- Businesses may choose to add return from foreign travel as a reason to complete the return to work form
- Return to work forms must be completed in full before a worker can resume duties
- All return to work forms must be kept on record for at least 12 months

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