

Toolbox Talk

Staying Away When You're Sick

There's a mentality that exists in Canadian workplaces of working when one is sick. The notion, similar to "playing through pain" in the sporting world, carries the idea of not wanting to miss too much work and falling behind on projects or even jeopardizing one's position.

And yet, the strains placed on a work environment by a sick co-worker can do more damage than being one person down for an extra day.

Consider, for example, the last time you got sick. What was your refrain when you spoke with a spouse or friend? "I caught what Darryl at work had" is common. How about "That darn Shelley, I have the flu because of her!"

See a pattern?

Though you may not consider yourself to be a threat to your co-workers or feel the need to get "back in the game", you can be doing a lot more harm than good. Between the potential for others to get sick and you being unable to perform to your full abilities, safety and the risk of injury for yourself or your co-workers begins to increase. Thus, being honest with yourself about just how ready you are to work is integral.

In an article for WebMD, Katherine Kam spoke with Catherine Cummins, MD, MSN, a health sciences assistant clinical professor at the University of California-Irvine School of Medicine. Dr. Cummins advised the following in determining whether you should avoid coming to work or not:

- How well can you carry out your work duties? If you're feeling quite sick, "you're going to have a hard time functioning and performing at your normal level," Cummins says.
- Are you contagious? If you have a viral or bacterial illness, you'll expose your coworkers and they in turn will infect others. Staying home when you're sick helps to curb germs in the community. "It's to contain the illness," Cummins says.
- Will resting at home help your body to overcome the illness? "We see a lot of worsening symptoms because people will just not stop and rest. They want to go; they want to be able to do everything that they normally do," Cummins says. "What they don't understand is that they're pushing themselves to the point where they're actually a lot sicker at the end of two to four days than they would have been if they had just taken that first day off and let their body fight the infection."

- Are you taking medications that could impair your ability to think, work, operate machinery, or drive? Let's say, for example, that you've been prescribed Vicodin for back pain and it's causing fuzzy thinking. "If you're so sick that you're using opiates or any controlled substance to control pain, you really need to stay home," Cummins says. "You shouldn't be driving, and you could have your performance impaired or it could even be dangerous."

Naturally, part of the concern with being sick is coming back to work too early. Thus, it's important to know the timespan of when you could be considered contagious. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention denote the following regarding the flu, a common ailment:

*"You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day **before** symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days **after** becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for an even longer time."*

For the safest method of determining whether you are ready to return to work, know the symptoms of your illness and consult a medical professional.

Related information:

Sick leave, Work-related illness and Injury leave, and Long-term disability plans – Government of Canada Labour Program -

http://www.labour.gc.ca/eng/standards_equality/st/pubs_st/sick_leave.shtml

References:

Kam, Katherine – "Too Sick to Work?" - <http://www.webmd.com/cold-and-flu/features/too-sick-to-work>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – "Key Facts about Influenza (Flu) & Flu Vaccine" - <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm>



For the Record

Date of Meeting: _____

Location: _____ Start Time: _____ Finish Time: _____

Topic: _____ Meeting Leader: _____

In Attendance (please print first & last names):
