

How do I know if I'm too sick to work?

Are you having troublesome symptoms like runny nose, fever, headache, coughing, or sore throat? Maybe you have back pain or a sinus infection and are wondering if you're too sick to go to work or school. How can you decide whether you or your child is better off trying to work (or go to school) or taking a sick day?

First and foremost, consider whether you are putting yourself or others at risk if you go to work. You're putting others at risk if you or your children have a contagious illness (more on that later). You're putting yourself at risk if the symptoms of your condition, or the side effects of medication, could cause you to have an accident on the job, injure others, or produce devastating mistakes in your work product. Putting anyone in harm's way is a clear reason to stay home.

Obviously going to work when you or your children can make others ill is not a good idea. Regarding contagious illnesses, many school systems have a "fever rule." Any child who is out sick must be fever-free for at least 24 hours before returning to school. This rule is designed to keep those with contagious illnesses away from others, and it is likely a good way to ensure that kids with the flu, strep throat, or other serious infections don't spread the germs to others. Applying the fever rule will only work in certain situations, however. What about infections that may easily spread to others but don't necessarily cause a fever? Contagious conditions that don't cause fever include the common cold, pinkeye, earache, and gastroenteritis.

Instead of just considering fever, it's prudent to consider your symptoms and if you're unsure, err on the side of sparing your coworkers and call in sick or work from home. Remember that some people (who could be your coworkers), such as those undergoing chemotherapy for cancer, those who have chronic conditions, and pregnant women may be particularly vulnerable to complications if they catch your illness.

Non-contagious conditions that might mean you can't work

Other kinds of conditions can also keep you home from work. Back pain, recovery from surgery, debilitating migraines, and broken bones may sometimes simply be associated with too much pain for you to work effectively, or the medications you take to control the pain could impair your work performance. The nature of your job also dictates what kind of medical conditions must keep you home. A desk worker may be able to work just fine while on crutches, but a lifeguard cannot.

REFERENCE:

Kasper, D., et al., eds. *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine, 19th Ed.* United States: McGraw-Hill Professional, 2015.

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Putting yourself or your work product at risk is another consideration. Even if your condition isn't contagious, you should think about staying home if the pain medications make you too drowsy to work effectively or if your limited mobility will pose a safety risk working with machinery. Or perhaps your lack of concentration could cause you to make a costly and/or damaging mistake for your company.

How do I know when to keep my sick child home from school?

Overall, you and your child's symptoms are the biggest clue as to whether you or they should be staying home. Symptoms likely to be associated with a contagious illness and are probably a clue that you or they should stay home. These include; fever, muscle aches and pains, fatigue, weakness, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, dizziness, and confusion.

If a person is in significant pain and is unable to concentrate or focus, that's another signal that he or she would better off at home. Finally, if you are taking any medications that affect your physical or mental abilities to do your job, a sick day is the best option.

If you're recovering from an illness and feel it is time to return to work, be sure to be extra vigilant with hygiene when you return to the job. Wash hands frequently, keep hand sanitizer available, and use sanitizing or disinfectant wipes to clean common work areas and shared items such as computer workstations. This is a good idea in any case during flu season, but your coworkers will appreciate it any time you've been out sick.

REFERENCE:

Kasper, D., et al., eds. *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine, 19th Ed.* United States: McGraw-Hill Professional, 2015.