



This hot topic will provide you an explanation of what Return To Work Questionnaires are, why they are required and what you need to include to create your own.

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.

Owners/Managers should motivate their workers to report any illness that may present a contamination risk. Punishing workers for absence due to illness such as reducing pay or even dismissal should be avoided where possible.

What is medical clearance to return to work?

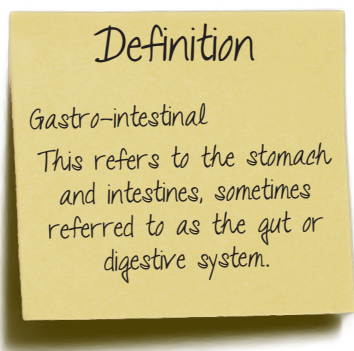
Medical clearance usually means that a doctor has been consulted to assess whether an individual is safe to return to the work place.

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 hours 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.



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.

The form should be clearly laid out in three sections:

- Part A: Workers declaration
- Part B: Owner/Managers approval
- Part C: Medical Clearance

Part A: Workers declaration

This section should be completed by the worker when returning from work following illness or possibly when returning from foreign holiday.

This section should contain:

- A space for the workers name
- A space for the date of return
- A series of check boxes for the illnesses of concern:
 - Diarrhoea
 - Vomiting
 - Discharge from gums/mouth, ears, eyes
 - Sore throat with fever
 - Re-occurring bowel disorder
 - Re-occurring skin ailment
 - Any other ailment that may present a risk to food safety
- A declaration of the taking of medication to combat diarrhoea or vomiting
- A space for the workers signature
- A space for the date the form is completed

An example of how section A should be layed out is shown below:

Return To Work Questionnaire				
This document is to be completed when returning from work following absence due to illness All sections should be completed as indicated by the relevant individuals				
Part A To be completed by all food handling employees when returning to work following illness	Name:		Date of Return:	
	During your absence from work, did you suffer any of the following? Please tick and add the date when the symptoms ceased			
		YES	NO	DATE
	Diarrhoea			
	Vomiting			
	Discharge from gum/mouth, ears or eyes			
	A sore throat with fever			
	A re-occurring bowel disorder			
	A re-occurring skin ailment			
	Any other ailment that may present a risk to food safety			
Have you recently taken any medication to combat diarrhoea or vomiting? Please tick Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>				
Signature (employee):		Date:		

Part B: Owners/Managers approval

This section should be completed by the workers manager or the owner of the business before the worker actually starts work.

This section should contain:

- A space for the owner/manager to confirm the workers name
- A space for the owner/managers signature
- A space for the date the form is signed by the owner/manager

It is usual to add some instruction in this section to help those completing the form to ensure the correct action is taken.

This would normally guide the owner/manager to sign off section B only if the section A shows the worker is clear of illness and that if any answer in section A shows the worker is not clear of illness that section C should be completed.

An example of how section B should be layed out is shown below:

Part B To be completed by the manager or supervisor	If the answer to all the above questions was 'NO', the person may be permitted to return to food handling duties (complete and sign below)
	If the answer to any of the above questions was 'YES', the person should not be allowed to handle food until they have been free of symptoms for 48 hours, or if formally excluded (by a doctor) medical advice states that they can return to their duties. Alternatively, in the case of food handlers with skin lesions on exposed skin (hands, neck, head) that are actively weeping or discharging, they must be excluded from work until the lesions have healed. (see part C below)
	I confirm that may resume food handling duties. Signature (Manager/Supervisor): Date:

Part C

With medical advice from

Part C: Medical Clearance

This section should be completed by the workers manager or the owner of the business after medical advice has been taken and before the worker starts work:

This section should contain:

- 3 options as to what medical advice has been given:
 - Exclusion from work until medical clearance is given
 - The worker should be moved to non-food handling duties
 - The worker can return to normal duties
- A statement that the worker can resume work with a space provided for the workers name
- A space for the owner/managers signature
- A space for the date the form is signed by the owner/manager

An example of how section C should be layed out is shown below:

Part C To be completed by the manager or supervisor after medical advice has been taken	What medical advice was received by the employee?		Please tick
	1. Exclusion from work until medical clearance is given		
	2. Move to alternative duties (non food handling) until clearance is given		
	3. Return to full food handling duties		
	If 1 or 2 are ticked, appropriate action must be taken. If 3 is ticked, the employee may resume duties immediately I confirm that may resume food handling duties.		
Signature (Manager/Supervisor):		Date:	

What should happen to this form once completed?

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 to remember:

- 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
- 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

You can download and print off a standard format return to work questionnaire should you wish to use it instead of creating your own. Search for Hot Topic 025 – Return To Work Questionnaire

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