



## The Sickness and Workplace Mix

Attitudes vary among employees on coming to work sick

by RaeAnne Marsh

WHILE EMPLOYERS DEAL with issues of healthcare coverage and employee benefits, the workplace environment is also impacted by the actions and attitudes of the work force. Study after study supports the belief that productivity is impacted by employees' health; that healthier employees are more productive. But do employees consider the effect of their healthcare choices on their place of work? This is a question the public health and safety organization **NSF International**, an independent, accredited organization, addressed in a recent survey of American workers.

NSF found that about a quarter of the workers (26 percent) always go to work when they are sick, but there is a great deal of variance among the other 74 percent as to how sick they are before they decide to stay home. "Doctor's orders" accounts for the smallest percent (9 percent); forming the greatest percent (34 percent) are those who make the decision based on feeling they are suffering the full effect of symptoms such as fever and upset stomach.

Age and gender generate different responses to being sick. Men are nearly twice as likely as women to go to work when sick (33 percent compared to 17 percent). Concern over meeting deadlines or being able to dig out of work that would pile up are reasons cited more often by men than women (45 percent compared to 38 percent) for coming to work when sick. This is also the reason cited by Gen Xers, who, at 54

percent, are more likely than other generations to come to work while sick.

How do the other employees feel about co-workers coming to work sick? Only 10 percent report no opinion. Of the 90 percent who do admit to judging their co-workers, a full two-thirds judge them positively, saying they come to work because they are hard workers. Fifty-seven percent view them with understanding, believing they can't afford to miss work. Holding a negative view of workers who come to work sick are 16 percent who consider them selfish in not caring about the health of their colleagues and 13 percent who think they don't trust their colleagues to do the job while they are out.

Nearly all workers (94 percent) take some form of precaution for their own health when they come in contact with a sick co-worker. There is little difference by gender (96 percent of women and 92 percent of men), but both the number who take an action and type of precaution they use does vary by age. The likelihood of a worker to disinfect his or her work place after a sick co-worker leaves increases among the younger generations: 36 percent in the 45-52 age range, 42 percent in the 34-44 age range, and 53 percent in the 18-34 age range. Vitamin or supplement use follows a different pattern: 43 percent in the 35-44 age range, 39 percent in the 45-54 age range, and 32 percent in the 18-34 age range. ■

NSF International [nsf.org](http://nsf.org)

## In Sickness or in Work?

How do employees deal with the issue?

Which of the following precautions, if any, do you take when you come in contact with a sick co-worker?

Take any precautions (Net)	94%
Use a hand sanitizer	68%
Take a vitamin or supplement	39%
Wash your hands	87%
Make an effort to not sit or stand near the sick co-worker	54%
Disinfect your workspace after the sick co-worker leaves	44%
Avoid eating in or using common areas, like break rooms, kitchens, cafeterias, etc.	32%
None of these/You don't take any precautions when coming in contact with a sick employee	6%
Don't know	1%

At what point do you decide to stay home due to an illness?

Don't always go to work when sick (Net)	74%
When you start to feel the onset of symptoms	11%
When you experience the full effect of symptoms, such as cough, stuffy nose, fever, head cold, upset stomach, etc.	34%
When you're sick enough to need to make an appointment with the doctor	19%
Only if the doctor tells you to stay home	9%
Always go to work through your illnesses or when you're sick	26%
Don't know	1%

Which of the following, if any, are reasons you go to work when you are sick?

Don't always go to work when sick (Net)	74%
Your boss expects you to come to work no matter what	25%
You have deadlines or too much work to dig out of when you get back	42%
You can't afford to be sick and miss work; for example, you don't have paid sick days	37%
You don't trust your colleagues to do the job while you're out	16%
You always stay home when you're sick	16%
Don't know	10%

Survey by NSF International, conducted in January 2014

