

# Fertility Wellbeing Policy

Do you have an open, supportive Fertility treatment policy in place?

With one in 6 couples struggling with infertility, large companies are finding that they have employees going through fertility treatment - and that it's having a significant impact on workplace productivity.

Respondents in a recent Fertility Network survey (of 900 women going through IVF) reported feeling sad, frustrated and worried nearly all of the time and 42% had experienced suicidal feelings.

In 2017, 54,760 women in the UK had IVF. If we apply that 42% to the total number of women going through IVF per year, that could be 23,000 women that have experienced suicidal thoughts due to infertility.

This shows the huge emotional trauma caused by infertility and explains why these women may struggle with day-to-day activities such as work, and why a clear supportive policy is critical for helping them function effectively in the workplace.

## Infertility and the workplace

A common worry of people going through fertility treatment is the impact on work. Fertility treatment is a very intensive process, with a requirement to attend lots appointments (during work hours, and every day at some points of treatment). It is also a highly emotional process, with sufferers struggling on a daily basis. It is therefore understandable why many worry about needing time off, having to tell their employer and also how it will impact their career.

The average number of days taken off work during a treatment cycle was 8.74, but time off ranged from a few days up to several months, depending on the level of stress.

Many organisations still don't have a policy around fertility treatment, leaving employees worried, and managers uncertain how to deal with the situation. This worry and uncertainty only adds to a very stressful situation for the employee and in some cases leads to them leaving their job.

Key worries about treatment include the impact of treatment on work. Difficulties combining treatment and work were apparent.

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### The survey found the following:

- 50% felt concerned that treatment would affect their career prospects
- 33% felt their career was damaged as a result of treatment
- 58% of respondents reported work affected their treatment (e.g. it was difficult to make appointments)
- 85% reported treatment affected their day to day work (e.g. it was difficult to concentrate).
- Those who received more employer support reported lower levels of distress and less frequent suicidal feelings.
- Those who felt work affected treatment and that treatment affected work and career reported greater distress, as well as more frequent suicidal feelings.
- 50% of respondents took up to a week off work, 24% took up to two weeks, 15% took up to three weeks, 11% took a month or longer off.
- 59% of respondents felt their employer would benefit from education/support to help them better understand the needs of someone having treatment.
- 23% of respondents reported their workplace had some policy relating to treatment. Those who reported no policy reported greater distress.

The respondents concerns about work and career increased with more cycles of treatment and were all related to greater levels of distress and suicidal feelings. Yet only one quarter of respondents reported the existence of supportive workplace policy and less than half received really good support from their employer.

The study recommended that workplace policy for fertility treatment is needed and this should be combined with guidance to support employers who may have limited understanding of the needs of someone having treatment.

### Benefit to you on having a Fertility Wellbeing policy

- A fair and open fertility wellbeing policy can be an appealing benefit to offer prospective employees. With infertility becoming a more recognised issue, Companies become appealing employers (particularly to women) when they offer a clear and supportive policy on Fertility treatment
- Keep loyal staff you have spent money training from leaving due to treatment worries.
- Clear policy for all managers to follow and reduce risk of discrimination/unfair dismissal claims. The employer and employees will then be clear on what they can and cannot do. It leaves less scope for an employee to successfully argue that any particular treatment received during IVF treatment is based on some form of unlawful discrimination.
- Create a reputation as an employer who values their employee's wellbeing.
- With an increased number of couples investing in IVF, a clear workplace policy covering fertility is essential to protect and support both employer and employee.
- If employees are supported, they are more likely to make treatment work around their job. They will be less likely to take time off due to stress, and there will be less impact on productivity.

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## Risk of not having a policy in place:

- Uncertainty around how to deal with employees going through treatment
- Leaving yourselves open to unfair dismissal/discrimination claims if an employee claims they have been discriminated against due to treatment.
- Valued, loyal staff leaving due to difficulties in managing work and treatment (19% of respondents had to reduce their work hours or quit their job).
- Cost of recruiting to replace staff who leave due to stress of treatment or are signed off.
- Drop in productivity in employees due to stress and worries around treatment (85% reported it affected their work, e.g. lack of concentration).

## How I can help you support your employees

I am a Fertility Coach and Mentor, and I work with organisations to implement a fair fertility wellbeing policy that helps their employees remain productive at work. I work with HR teams to create a fair and open Fertility wellbeing policy, that supports management and employees, and I then work with management teams on how to effectively manage and support employees going through fertility treatment.

With infertility becoming a more recognised issue, having an open and fair policy will help you create a reputation as an employer with a strong emphasis on employee wellbeing.

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