



The myths and truths about paid sick days¹



In Canada there is no legal entitlement to paid sick leave, whether at the federal or provincial level.² That means that workers are left to depend on their employers to provide paid sick leave, leaving millions without any access. In Ontario, the Employment Standards Act only guarantees up to 10 job-protected **unpaid emergency leave days for workers in workplaces of 50 or more employees.** That means that more than [1.6 million Ontario workers](#)³ aren't even protected against losing their job if they take an unpaid emergency leave day. The result is that millions of workers can't afford to take a day off to take care of themselves or their families when they are ill, and are faced with the choice of going to work sick, sending a sick child to school or daycare, or losing pay and potentially getting fired.

Health care workers know that when workers don't have paid sick day guarantees, they stay sick longer, they can get others around them sick, and that the burden on the health care system is high.

Here are a few myths about paid sick days and some facts to bust them.

MYTH #1:

Workers don't need the law to guarantee paid sick days, they can simply rely on voluntary employer policies.

Reality: Reliance on voluntary sick leave benefits is not enough. [Canada relies more heavily than many other countries on private coverage](#) for sick leave and disability insurance. A [Conference Board of Canada study](#) last year found that only a third of employees between the ages of 18 and 24 have any paid sick days, and fewer than half of Canadians young and old are covered by employer sick leave. And [the lower a workers' wages](#), the less likely they have access to paid leaves.

MYTH #2:

Businesses can't afford to give their workers paid sick days – if they were forced to, employers would have to cut wages or jobs.

Reality: Paid sick day laws help businesses reduce turnover and improve worker productivity. When companies respond to the needs of working families, workers are more committed and productive, and workplaces stay healthy. Experiences in the US demonstrate that this is true. In San Francisco, where paid sick days have been legislated by the county since 2007, [a survey of more than 700 employers](#) and nearly 1,200 employees found that the city's paid sick leave ordinance had benefited employees without reducing employer profitability. [Another study](#) of the San Francisco ordinance found that employers found the law easier and less costly to implement than they had anticipated, and wished that the law applied state-wide to "level the playing field" amongst all employers.

¹ Acknowledgements go to the US-based National Partnership for Women & Families and their campaign, [paysickdays.org](#), for the inspiration for this fact sheet.

² With the exception of Prince Edward Island, which offers 1 day of paid leave per year only for workers that have been employed with the same employer for 5 years (IRPP http://irpp.org/research-studies/report-2015-09-03/?mc_cid=21ca7137ad&mc_eid=c2b5459aa2).

³ For references, please visit <http://15andfairness.org/health-care-providers-support-paid-sick-leave/>

MYTH #3:

Workers with access to paid sick days will abuse the policy.

Reality: The evidence from jurisdictions that have implemented legislated paid sick leave policies shows that workers very rarely abuse their access to paid sick days, and tend to take fewer days than those to which they are entitled. In San Francisco, for example, [research from 2011](#) showed that despite the availability of either 5 or 9 paid sick days per year, the typical worker used only 3, and one quarter of workers used none. The same research showed that parents with paid sick leave were more than 20% less likely to send their sick child to school than parents who did not have access to paid sick days.

MYTH #4:

Restaurants have small profit margins and large labour forces – they can't afford to offer paid sick days.

Reality: While there are some minor costs to employers that provide paid sick days, the costs of not doing so are even greater. [The research](#) demonstrates this. [A 2010 study](#) of more than 4000 workers in the restaurant industry revealed that nearly 63% of cooks and servers went to work while sick. Similarly, a 2013 study by the [Centers for Disease Control](#) of nearly 500 food service workers revealed that 60% had worked while knowingly ill. When asked why, half of the workers reported they did not want to lose income and a quarter said they feared losing their jobs. The most common reason workers chose to go to work sick was because their employers did not offer paid sick days. Similarly, a study led by the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) focusing on high-risk work settings (e.g. food handlers, daycare workers, and healthcare workers) found that a key reason why workers with gastrointestinal illness continued to work while ill was because “they could not afford to take time off.” In an industry like food service where workers handle food and interact with a high volume of customers, the potential for disease transmission is high, and the costs to businesses – of re-staffing, re-stocking, clean-up, fines, permit suspension, and negative public opinion – are even higher.

MYTH #5:

A “one-size-fits-all” policy is bad for business. Setting a standard of paid sick days will make businesses less flexible.

Reality: A legislated paid sick day standard simply sets a minimum floor of labour standards – that is the role of Ontario's Employment Standards Act. A minimum labour standard of paid sick days would ensure that businesses are addressing workers' basic needs, but leave employers free to go beyond this floor to meet the needs of their workforce. A minimum standard of paid sick days would also help level the playing field for businesses that already offer them. Such a standard is not “one-size-fits-all” – it is a basic minimum that society believes all workers deserve.

Join the fight for paid sick days. Join the fight for decent work. Find out more at:



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