



# THE MYTHS & TRUTHS ABOUT PAID SICK DAYS

Paid sick days are a key part of maintaining safe workplaces, public health, and the economy, yet **no jurisdiction in Canada has adequate paid sick days**. Canada is one of less than a quarter of countries globally that do not guarantee paid sick leave on the first day of illness – a crucial measure to stop the spread of infections. [58% of Canadians don't have access to a single paid sick day](#). Millions of workers can't afford to take a day off to care for themselves or their families when they are ill, and are faced with the choice of going to work sick (or sending a sick child to school or daycare) or losing pay and potentially getting fired.

As health care workers, we know that when our patients don't have paid sick days, they stay sick longer, can get others around them sick, and that the burden on the health care system is high. We also know that [50% of workers in the health care and social services sectors don't have paid sick days](#), and that health worker safety and outbreak containment go hand-in-hand.

## 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 lags behind globally](#) in guaranteeing workers access to adequate paid sick days for short-term illness. In response to the worst global pandemic in a century, no Canadian jurisdiction has raised employment standards to expand access to paid sick days. 58% of workers across Canada do not have a single paid sick day. That number [jumps to over 70% for low-wage workers](#), who are **disproportionately women, racialized workers, and workers with disabilities**. Additionally, for workers in precarious jobs lacking security, like migrant and temp workers, advocating for their rights could threaten their livelihood. Legislating paid sick days will **protect the most precarious among us and make all of us safer**.

## MYTH #2

### **BUSINESSES CAN'T AFFORD TO GIVE WORKERS PAID SICK DAYS – IF THEY WERE FORCED TO, THEY'D 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. Going to work sick results in more mistakes and higher risk of injury, and workers with paid sick days are [28% less likely to get injured at work](#). Paid sick days have been shown to [reduce the chance of workers leaving a job by 25%](#), resulting in substantial savings for business due to reduced turnover. Evidence shows time and again that **the cost of workers going to work sick (presenteeism) in lost productivity is higher than absenteeism** — with US research suggesting it could be as much as 10x higher.

[In San Francisco](#), where paid sick days have been legislated since 2007, 2/3rds of employers supported the new law, and 6 out of 7 did not report any negative effect on profitability. [In New York City](#), a survey of employers (most of whom had less than 50 employees) found that they “were able to adjust quite easily to the new law, and for most **the cost impact was minimal to nonexistent**.” A year and a half after the paid sick days law in NYC took effect, 86% of employers supported the law, 91% did not reduce hiring, 97% did not reduce hours, and 94% did not raise prices.

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

For references, please see The Decent Work & Health Network's 2020 report on paid sick days: [decentworkandhealth.org/beforetoolate](#)

### MYTH #3

## WORKERS WITH ACCESS TO PAID SICK DAYS WILL ABUSE THE POLICY.

**Reality:** Evidence from jurisdictions that have implemented legislated paid sick leave policies shows that workers rarely abuse their access to paid sick days, and tend to take fewer days than those to which they are entitled. When San Francisco mandated up to 9 paid sick days, workers used an average of only 3, and a quarter used none. This reveals that workers treat paid sick days as insurance and use them carefully, in cases of personal or family emergencies and for necessary medical appointments. 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. When New York City mandated paid sick days, a survey of employers found that 98% reported no known cases of abuse. In short, there is **no evidence that workers widely abuse paid sick days**, but there is an abundance of evidence of their benefits for individuals, communities, and businesses.

### MYTH #4

## RESTAURANTS HAVE SMALL PROFIT MARGINS & LARGE LABOUR FORCES – THEY CAN'T AFFORD TO OFFER PAID SICK DAYS.

**Reality:** While there are some costs to employers that provide paid sick days, **the costs of not doing so are greater**. The research shows this. A 2010 study of more than 4,000 workers in the restaurant industry found that over 87% had no paid sick days and more than 63% reported working – preparing, cooking, and serving food – while sick. Similarly, a 2013 study by the Centers for Disease Control found that 60% of food service workers interviewed had worked while knowingly ill. When asked why, half the workers said they didn't want to lose income and a quarter said they feared losing their jobs. The most common reason workers went to work sick was because their employers didn't offer paid sick days.

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 worked while ill was because “they could not afford to take the 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 each province's Employment Standards legislation. It is also the role of the Canada Labour Code for workers in industries that regulated by the federal government. 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 public health necessity and a basic minimum that society believes all workers deserve.

For more information, read the Decent Work and Health Network's 2020 report on paid sick days, “Before it's Too Late: How to Close the Paid Sick Day Gap During COVID-19 and Beyond” by visiting: [decentworkandhealth.org/beforetoolate](https://decentworkandhealth.org/beforetoolate)

**Join the fight for paid sick days. Join the fight for decent work:**



**DECENT WORK &  
HEALTH NETWORK**

[decentworkandhealth.org](https://decentworkandhealth.org)



[15andfairness.org](https://15andfairness.org)