

Sick days are meant to help workers recover from an illness, but research shows they also can be a factor in keeping people from getting sick in the first place.

A recent study by researchers from Florida Atlantic University and Cleveland State University found that workers who receive ten or more paid sick days per year are more likely than those with fewer days to get preventive care, including screenings like mammograms and blood pressure or cholesterol checks.

“What we’re understanding is that anything less than ten days people are really saving for illness,” said LeaAnne DeRigne, Ph.D., associate professor in the Phyllis and Harvey Sandler School of Social Work at Florida Atlantic University and lead author of the study. Employees might be worried about having enough days if they do get sick or making sure they can stay at home if their children get sick, she explained.

“Not until they get to the ten-day mark do they begin to think about ‘now I have time to get a stress check on my heart or go to my OB/GYN’ ” she said. They “start to think more about long-term health and their health as an overall picture.”

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that Americans use preventive services at about half the recommended rate. A July 2018 CDC report showed that use of cancer screening tests for cervical, breast and colorectal cancer were below targets.

The International Foundation report *Paid Leave in the Workplace: 2017 Survey Results* found that the average number of sick days offered after one year of service was 10.9 days for hourly workers and 11.1 days for salaried workers.

Employers that don’t believe they can offer ten or more sick days could consider providing on-site services for preventive care, DeRigne said. Flu shots or mobile clinics that can offer services like cholesterol screening and blood pressure checks are helpful.

Another alternative to increased sick time is increasing flexibility, DeRigne suggested. For example, a worker might be allowed to leave a couple of hours early in order to get the last appointment of the day.

According to a survey by Zocdoc/Kelton Global, 60% of U.S. workers feel uncomfortable leaving work for preventive care appointments, so that kind of flexibility may be welcome. Zocdoc, a digital health company that offers services including online appointment booking, is advocating for employers to take that flexibility a step further.

The company started an “unsick day” movement, encouraging employers to give their employees one day off per year to use for preventive care such as annual physicals, skin screenings and dental cleanings.

DeRigne likes the idea of offering an unsick day. “The more we can say about setting time aside for preventive care, I think the more likely it is that people will use it for that. If you knew your company was going to give you a day to have a wellness check, most people would follow through with that kind of appointment.”

