

Smokers take three extra sick days off every year costing UK businesses £1.4billion

By James Andrew And Fiona Macrae

Smokers take three more sick days each year than non-smokers, at a cost to UK businesses of £1.4billion, research shows.

Crunching together the results of 27 previous studies involving more than 70,000 workers revealed smokers to be off sick more often and for longer.

They were 33 per cent more likely to miss work than non-smokers, and they were absent an average of 2.74 extra days per year.



Calling in sick: A new study shows smokers take three more sick days than non-smokers

Ex-smokers also took more sick days than those who had never smoked.

However, they were off less than those who hadn't quit the habit, suggesting that encouraging employees to give up pays dividends for businesses.

The Nottingham University researchers calculated that if the results from their study were applied to the whole of the UK, the extra sick days would amount to a £1.4billion annual bill for companies.

The figure does not factor in other costs, including time lost to smoking breaks.

Researcher Stephen Weng said that the bulk of the absences could be explained by ill-health and, in particular, recurring problems, such as heart or respiratory disease.

Mr Weng said employers should run stop-smoking programmes in the workplace.

Employees may benefit from the support of their colleagues, while the schemes might also be attractive to young men who rarely visit their doctor.

Researchers asked the workers about their current and former smoking habits and used surveys or medical and employee records to track how often they were absent over an average of two years.

The researchers calculated that current smokers were still 19 per cent more likely to miss work than ex-smokers, so encouraging smokers to quit could help reverse some of the lost-work trends.

'Quitting smoking appears to reduce absenteeism and result in substantial cost-savings for employers,' said fellow researcher Jo Leonardi-Bee.



Expensive habit: Sick days taken by smokers are costing the UK economy £1.4 billion

In the analysis, smoking was tied to workers' short-term absences as well as leaves of four weeks or more.

'Clearly the most important message for any individual's health is, 'Quit smoking,' but I think that message is pretty well out there,' said Douglas Levy, a tobacco and public health researcher from the Harvard Medical School in Boston who wasn't a part of the study.

'I think (the study) does point to the fact that this is something that doesn't just affect the individual, it affects the economy as well.'

Levy's own research has shown that children living with smokers are more likely to be absent from school. Secondhand smoke has been tied to a range of health ailments, from asthma to heart attacks, so employees who light up may also have to miss work more often to stay at home with sick family members. Levy said the most important finding was the reduction in absenteeism after workers quit smoking, supporting the idea of companies funding smoking-cessation classes and other workplace health programs.