

## Fertility In the Workplace, 2023

The issue of fertility health is sadly neglected in the UK – even though most people consider having children as **the most important decision of their lives**. Infertility is recognised by the World Health Organisation as a disease of the reproductive system and should be handled at work in the same way as any other health condition, however it is often considered to be a non-medical condition and even a ‘life-style choice’.

Fertility Network UK is the UK’s leading patient-led charity, supporting people facing fertility struggles. Fertility In the Workplace aims to help employers better understand what this entails for employees, as well as their colleagues, to enable them to provide much needed understanding and support.

A nationwide survey commissioned by Fertifa and Fertility Network UK, of which more than 3,000 people responded, has revealed the profound and extensive impact of fertility challenges on individuals in the workplace. This is the largest survey ever conducted in the UK on fertility in the workplace, and the results are too big to ignore.

**Nearly 9 out of 10 (86%)** respondents said that their productivity at work was strongly impacted by fertility challenges, whilst more than **1 in 3 (34%)** said that they received very little or no support from their employer.

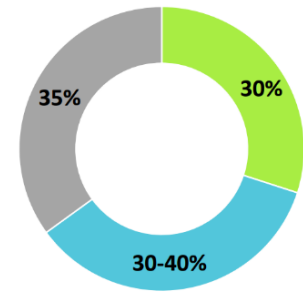
The research highlights the importance of fertility support for employees. **Almost 1 in 5 (16%)** quit their jobs because of the impact fertility treatment had. For employers looking at staff retention and workplace wellbeing, this is a crucial piece of information and there are so many things that can be done to support staff and make them feel valued during this difficult time.

The survey findings also highlight that people do not feel able to speak to their employer about what they are experiencing, as **34.8%** of people took time off from work, without telling their employer the real reason why.

Detailed findings include:

- **83.2%** of people said that fertility support or a fertility policy was very Important when they were considering a new job or employer.
- **38.8%** of people considered leaving their job because of fertility treatment.
- **15.8%** of people did either leave their jobs or they took a significant change in responsibilities.
- **1 in 10** people would quit their jobs in search of one that had better fertility benefits.
- **34.8%** of people took annual leave, sick leave, or unpaid leave to cope with the emotional and physical impact of fertility treatment, without telling their employer.

Although this is not a condition that only affects women, data indicates that male factor infertility makes up around a third of all cases of couples struggling to conceive, fertility challenges disproportionately impact women in the workplace, as it is them that must undergo the majority of the treatment processes and attend appointments, often at short notice. This confirms yet another example of the gender-health gap and reaffirms how important it is for employers to implement fertility support to create inclusive workplaces.

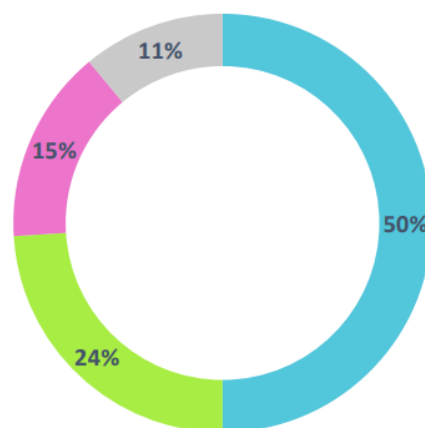


■ Female issues ■ Male issues ■ Unexplained

Add to this the complexity of trying to start a family in the LGBTQ+ community and the impact of fertility treatments on the workplace increases still. In the UK it is estimated that over 1.5 million people identify as LGBTQ+ and 262,000 people whose gender is different to the one they were assigned at birth. For those who want to have a family with a biological connection, either to themselves or their partner, they will likely need to have some level of fertility treatment. The process for LGBTQ+ communities can be logistically and financially hard and time-consuming, as there are often more criteria to meet when there isn't necessarily a health-related fertility problem. Stonewall report that more than 1 third of LGBTQ+ staff have hidden that they are LGBTQ+ at work for fear of discrimination. This can be particularly challenging when starting fertility treatments and adds another layer of complexity in an already emotional journey.

In 2016 Fertility Network UK and Middlesex University looked at the impact of fertility problems in the workplace and established that the average number of days taken off work during a treatment cycle was 8.74 (SD 9.32). Taking more days off was associated with greater distress and as we have seen in our most recent study, time off for treatment is managed in various ways with annual leave and sick leave being most used. Bearing in mind, many people will have multiple cycles in a year, time off can have a big impact in the workplace and could potentially be reduced with better support and flexibility.

## Reality – Time off



■ 1 week ■ 2 weeks ■ 3 weeks ■ More

**Average 8 days per cycle**

At Fertility Network UK we have shown repeatedly that most people experiencing fertility problems are reluctant to speak to their employer, because they fear it may have a detrimental effect on their career. We know it is not uncommon for staff to end up reducing

their hours or quitting their job if they are unable to balance work and fertility issues. This can be a challenge for employers both operationally and financially, and why a growing number of firms now have a fertility policy in place outlining the help available – they appreciate a supportive workplace is good for business as well as for employees.

Fertility Network UK's 2022 survey with Middlesex University looked at the impact of fertility problems on mental health and found that because of fertility problems and/or treatment:

- **83%** of respondents felt sad, frustrated and worried often or all the time
- **47%** experienced feelings of depression often or all the time
- **40%** experienced suicidal feelings with 10% of these feeling this way often or all the time.

To expect that these feelings would or should not impact on a person's work is unrealistic and there is a huge need for people to feel able to talk about their fertility struggles without feeling that it will have a detrimental effect on their careers.

A key thing to remember, as an employer or manager, is that by the time a couple or individual reaches the stage of fertility treatments, they have probably already endured several years of trying to conceive and their mental health will already have been impacted. Having a good understanding of what fertility treatments can involve and recognising that this is not a choice but a medical condition, can make all the difference to an employee in trying to juggle this difficult journey alongside their workplace commitments. Understanding from employers and colleagues that fertility treatments do not always have a happy ending is also crucial, as the assumption that if someone is having fertility treatments means they will be leaving to have a baby can be a very damaging one.

### **Flexibility & understanding is key!**

**AT FERTILITY IN THE WORKPLACE, WE CAN PROVIDE FREE SUPPORT TO EMPLOYERS, EMPLOYEES AND BUSINESS OWNERS WORKING IN SMALL TO MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (SMES), AS WELL AS SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN AND THOSE LOOKING TO RETURN TO WORK.**



Thanks to VCSE Health and Wellbeing Fund, part of a partnership programme between Department of Health & Social Care, NHS England, and UK Health Security Agency, Fertility in the Workplace (FITW) are delighted to be able to offer free education and support packages to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), self-employed and unemployed women across England, until March 2025.

This program works alongside the recent Women's Health Strategy for England, which aims to improve the health and wellbeing of women, and help to support them remain in work and return to work.

For further information please see [www.fertilitynetworkuk.org/resources/](http://www.fertilitynetworkuk.org/resources/)