

COVID: Death Risk Higher for Men

Research findings suggest that men in Ireland are more likely than women to die from covid infection.

The Society of Actuaries in Ireland says that once a person has been diagnosed, death risk for male patients is 25% more likely than for females, rising to 50% in some age ranges. The research study found that the disparity in death rates was most evident during the third wave of the pandemic, beginning last December. The reasons for this trend are unclear, but there are suggestions that higher rates of obesity, heart disease, and alcohol intake among men may be contributing factors, and potentially better immune responses among women. However, the authors accept that this is conjecture. Overall, the analysis of data shows a gender of over 20 per cent in favour of women in terms of COVID survival.

The findings are consistent with evidence in over 90 other countries where data is available.

Sick Pay for all Irish workers by 2025

A new scheme will be phased in, whereby all workers in the Republic of Ireland will have the right to be paid for up to 10 days sick leave per annum by 2025, under plans which were agreed by the Government today.

The new scheme is to be phased in over the next four years, to give employers time to plan for the extra costs.

Under the proposed Sick Leave Bill 2021, employees will be entitled to three days' sick pay per annum from next year. This will rise to five days in 2022 and seven in 2024, before reaching the maximum of ten days each year in 2025.

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment Leo Varadkar said "Ireland is one of the few advanced countries in Europe not to have a mandatory sick pay scheme. Although about half of employers do provide sick pay, we need to make sure that every worker, especially lower paid workers in the private sector have the security and peace of mind of knowing that if they fall ill and miss work, they won't lose out on a full day's pay."

Mr Varadkar added: "I believe this scheme can be one of the positive legacies of the pandemic, as it will apply to illness of all forms and not just those related to COVID."

Employers will have to make the payments at 70% of an employee's wage, up to a daily threshold of €110, a figure based on the 2019 mean annual salary of €40,889.16.

An impact analysis carried out by the State estimates this to be equivalent to a 2.6% pay increase, in terms of value to the average employee currently receiving no sick pay from their employer.

To avail of the scheme, employees will have to obtain a medical certificate from their doctor and will need to have worked for their employer for at least six months. After the employer sick pay period ends, the employee may qualify for illness benefit from the Department of Social Protection if still unwell.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has welcomed the move, which they say is "decades overdue".

Speaking to the media following today's Cabinet decision, Mr Varadkar said that it was hoped the bill would be enacted before the end of the year, and that the scheme would begin from 1st January 2022. He said it is simply not good that people experiencing illness are afraid to take time off for fear of losing income (RTE News). This is a new right, where none previously existed, and Mr. Varadkar expressed his hope that the Opposition will join the Government in supporting the move.

While I welcome any move that enhances the rights of workers, I think it will be important to remember that in real terms, the monetary benefit to employees will be less than the sick pay sum, since the current cost of a visit to a GP is in the region of €50 to €70 per visit, with prescribed medications often incurring significant costs (although a tax relief scheme is in place). Medical and GP Visit Cardholders are exempt from GP charges account for just 32 per cent of the population, including those who have reached retirement age.

Clarity sought after parents turned away from vaccine centres.

Current HSE guidelines say a person must attend their vaccine appointment alone (although they can be driven to the vaccination centre by someone else). It is also specified that it is forbidden to bring children to vaccination appointments.

But what happens to those who cannot find or afford childcare? There have been instances of parents with no-one to mind their children being turned away from vaccination centres.

One Family Ireland is an organisation that works to ensure a positive and equal future for all members of all one-parent families in Ireland. Karen Kiernan, spokesperson and CEO of One Family has called for assistance to attend COVID-19 vaccination appointments to be made available, rather than refusing entry. She said that it should be possible for people to request alternative appointment times, for example when older children might be at school, or to attend at a quieter time, if they must bring a pre-school child along. Ms Kiernan is therefore seeking clarity from the Health Service Executive on the issue, citing anecdotal evidence that workers at a vaccination centre suggested that parents leave their children in the car. She said this is neither safe nor appropriate, particularly in the event of a parent having an adverse reaction to the vaccine.