

Faculty Guide to Filing a Medical Leave of Absence with MetLife

Northwestern's Faculty Medical Leave policy (excerpted from the Faculty Handbook, pgs. 46-47):

"Faculty members with benefits-eligible, half-time or greater appointments who are unable to work as a result of a medically certified disability [see notes] become eligible for paid sick leave. Such faculty members may receive up to six consecutive months (including summer) at budgeted salary. Faculty members who are also enrolled in benefits through additional employers, such as those provided by Northwestern Medical Group or other affiliated hospitals, may have different medical leave benefits and should contact those employers directly for additional information."

Notes:

- Although not specifically mentioned in the Faculty Handbook, **all Northwestern employees (including faculty) must have completed 6 months of benefits-eligible service** to be eligible for a paid medical leave.
- In the paragraph above, the phrase "medically certified disability" is meant to refer to an injury, accident, surgery, or serious illness which leaves you unable to perform one or more of the essential duties of your occupation. Your physician will be required to provide medical documentation to support your need for a medical leave.

How do I request a medical leave?

To request a medical leave, follow these steps:

1. Speak with your physician to determine how much time you will likely need away from work.
2. Contact MetLife at [1-800-396-8876](tel:1-800-396-8876) or <https://mybenefits.metlife.com> to initiate the leave process. More information on MetLife's role and process is provided below.
3. Inform your department chair or supervisor as soon as possible once you know you need a medical leave. You are only required to tell them the dates during which you will be on leave. You are not required to disclose any medical information.

MetLife's role:

Northwestern's medical leave program operates within the legal framework defined by state and federal regulations about such benefits. The University is required to inform you about your eligibility for state and federal medical benefits under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). To do this, the University works with a third-party benefits administrator, MetLife, to verify the details of your medical condition with your physician. Although in most circumstances, the University's faculty medical leave benefit is more generous than FMLA requires, it is still critical that faculty taking medical leaves speak to MetLife. This is important for two reasons. First, MetLife assists by serving as a secure third party, gathering and reviewing your medical documentation and assessing your eligibility for leave under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) without your having to reveal your personal medical information to Northwestern managers.

Second, the University is required to report all FMLA usage to the federal government, and MetLife assists in tracking this. Please note that any leave of absence time taken for parental reasons counts as usage of your available FMLA leave, but there will be no interruption in your pay or benefits, since the University's faculty family leaves are always paid leaves.

MetLife will need to contact your physician as part of this process, so please be sure to have the physician's name, phone, and fax number handy before contacting MetLife. MetLife can be reached at [1-800-396-8876](tel:1-800-396-8876) or online at <https://mybenefits.metlife.com>.

Speaking with MetLife

Some questions MetLife may ask you, and what they mean:

Question:	What it means:	Guidance on your response:
"What is the first day of work you missed?"	"What is your first day of leave?"	It is understood that faculty schedules vary, and you may not be in your office, lab, or classroom every day. For the purposes of this question, provide the first day that you will formally be on leave, even if you were not scheduled to be on campus that day.
"What was your last day worked"	"What was the last day before your leave began?" or, if your leave has not yet begun, "What is the day before your leave is scheduled to begin?"	It is understood that faculty schedules vary, and you may not be in your office, lab, or classroom every day. It is recommended that you tell MetLife the last day before your leave of absence is to begin, regardless of whether you were scheduled to be on campus that day.
"Do you know your HR contact's name and phone number?"	If we need to confirm any information with Northwestern, whom should we call?	You can provide the contact information for the faculty affairs representative in your school, or you can refer to Alex Rot, Assistant Provost of Faculty Operations in the Office of the Provost, 847/467-4127, alex.rot@northwestern.edu
"Are you hourly or salaried?"		For the purposes of MetLife, all benefits-eligible faculty are considered salaried.
"Do you work Monday-Friday, 9-5?"	"Are you a full-time employee?"	Of course faculty frequently work evenings and weekends as well, but what you should communicate to MetLife is that you are full-time (if this is true).
"Have you ever been a temporary employee?"	"Were you ever employed as a temporary staff member at Northwestern?"	Likely the answer is no, though if you have worked as a Northwestern temp you should say so.

What to expect after speaking to MetLife:

Following your conversation with MetLife, MetLife will reach out to your physician's office to gather the necessary medical documentation to support your leave request. It is best if you make your physician aware that they will be contacted in this manner. MetLife may also ask for your support in this documentation-gathering process.

MetLife will then issue you documentation confirming your eligibility and approval for medical leave, in the form of one or more letters (for example you may receive one letter confirming your eligibility for medical leave and a second confirming that your leave has been approved). These letters will state the dates of your approved leave. Please note that this letter may:

1. Refer to your medical leave as Extended Sick Time (EST). In this context, this term is synonymous with the faculty medical leave.
2. State your eligibility and approval for FMLA along with your eligibility and approval for faculty medical leave. This is because any time used for faculty medical leave counts against an employee's federally-mandated 12 weeks of available FMLA leave, and so both types of leave are tracked concurrently.

In the event that your medical leave will be longer than the amount of available FMLA time that you have (maximum 12 weeks), this letter will state that your FMLA leave eligibility is "exhausted", and you may receive an additional letter near the date when this FMLA time "runs out". Do not be alarmed. This does not mean that your Northwestern medical leave eligibility is exhausted; it simply means that your medical leave will extend beyond the minimum 12 weeks required by the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

Faculty members should discuss their upcoming leave of absence with their Department Chair, and are encouraged to direct any questions regarding their leave, teaching assignments, or other issues to their respective Dean's Office or Faculty Affairs Office. If you have additional questions about eligibility or the amount of leave available to you, you may contact the Office of the Provost. More information on faculty leaves can also be found here:

<https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies-procedures/faculty-leaves/>

Frequently Asked Questions:

Will I still receive full pay while on medical leave?

Yes, Northwestern's medical leave benefit provides full pay and benefits at a faculty member's normal base salary rate.

How long can I be on medical leave?

Northwestern provides up to 6 months of fully paid medical leave. The exact amount of leave for which a faculty member is approved will be based on medical necessity, as determined by their physician and approved by MetLife.

My medical leave is about to start, and I haven't received a formal approval letter from MetLife yet. Why?

After you speak with MetLife to request a medical leave, MetLife will issue you an eligibility letter documenting the amount of leave that you are likely eligible for. However, they may not issue a formal approval letter until your leave actually begins, as they may need to verify the actual leave start date with you once the leave has begun.

It seems like there are a lot of different names for medical leave. Are these all the same thing?

Faculty medical leave can also be called sick leave, extended sick time (EST), or short-term disability (STD). The term FMLA (which stands for the Family Medical Leave Act) is often mentioned in conversations about faculty medical leave, but does not mean the same thing as faculty medical leave. See next question for further information on FMLA.

What is the difference between faculty medical leave and FMLA?

The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) requires employers to provide at least 12 weeks of unpaid leave to employees who have worked at least 1,250 hours within the past continuous 12 months, for reasons including one's own health condition as well as to care for an ill family member. Northwestern's faculty medical leave benefit provides a richer benefit than what is required by FMLA. However, any time spent on faculty medical leave counts against a faculty member's 12 available weeks of FMLA leave. **Example:** A faculty member falls ill and takes a medical leave for 8 weeks. They receive full pay during this 8-week leave, thanks to Northwestern's faculty medical leave policy. However, these 8 weeks count against their 12 available weeks of FMLA leave. If this same faculty member needs to take a different leave of absence later in the year to care for an ill parent, for instance, they will only have 4 weeks of FMLA leave remaining for this purpose.

Do I have to perform any work while on medical leave?

No, a faculty member cannot be compelled to perform any work while on medical leave. If you are receiving pressure to perform work, please contact the Office of the Provost at facultyrecords@northwestern.edu

I'd like to work a few hours per week while on medical leave. Is this allowed?

Faculty who would like to perform some work while on medical leave should request a "reduced schedule medical leave" when speaking to MetLife. A reduced schedule medical leave will provide faculty with permission to continue to do some work, up to a certain number of hours per week as approved by their physician, while still receiving full pay.

What happens if I use 6 months of medical leave and am not well enough to return to work?

MetLife will work with your physician to evaluate a possible transition from medical leave to long-term disability. Further information on Northwestern's long-term disability benefit can be found at <https://www.northwestern.edu/hr/benefits/health-insurance/long-term-disability/index.html>. After six months, this long-term disability benefit would be at 50% pay plus benefits – 60% if the faculty member bought more long-term disability protection through Northwestern.

For further questions:

if you have any questions regarding the amount of leave you are eligible for under Northwestern's policy, you can contact your school's dean's office or faculty affairs office, or the Office of the Provost (Alex Rot, Assistant Provost for Faculty Operations, 847-467-4127, alex.rot@northwestern.edu).