



a members' guide to

the menopause: a workplace issue



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Introduction

It's time to talk about the menopause

The menopause has been perceived as a private issue for women and not openly spoken about generally – and especially not in the workplace – for far too long.

Prospect believes this attitude needs to change – and employers and trade union reps have an important role in starting conversations and raising awareness.

The menopause will affect all women to a greater or lesser extent at some point in their lives. Around one in three women in the UK are currently either going through, or have reached, the menopause.

Some women will experience severe symptoms, while others may sail through it effortlessly (see below).

When women are going through the change of life, their health and relationships at work and at home may be affected.

As around half of the UK workforce are women and retirement/pension ages have increased, the menopause will affect workplaces everywhere.

That's why it is so important to understand the impact of the menopause on women – and how it affects their work and their relationships with colleagues.

This guidance aims to:

- raise awareness
- explain employers' responsibilities
- give reps guidance on good practice and levers that can be used to address the issues in their workplaces.

1. What you need to know

1.1 The menopause, also known as the change of life, is when a woman stops menstruating for 12 consecutive months. The hormonal changes and the associated symptoms (see below) can last from four to eight years – but can last for much longer.

1.2 It is a natural part of women's ageing process that usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55. The average age for a woman in the UK to start her menopause is 51.

1.3 But it can start earlier: around one in 100 women experience the menopause before the age of 40 – known as premature menopause.

1.4 Women will start to experience the symptoms during the peri-menopause – the period leading up to the menopause when the hormonal changes start.

1.5 A number of symptoms are associated with the menopause and around 80% of women will experience noticeable symptoms.

1.6 The severity of the symptoms will be different for each individual and some of them may change over time. The most common symptoms are:

- hot flushes and palpitations
- night sweats
- insomnia and sleep disturbances
- fatigue
- poor concentration


- headaches
- joint aches
- skin irritation and dryness
- dry eyes
- urinary problems
- hair loss
- changes to periods: eg irregular, heavy bleeding or painful
- vaginal dryness, itching and discomfort
- loss of libido
- osteoporosis.

1.7 The psychological symptoms may include:

- depression
- anxiety
- panic attacks
- mood swings
- irritability
- memory lapses
- loss of confidence.

1.8 Some symptoms will, of course, overlap. For example, night sweats and sleep disturbances will exacerbate anxiety, depression, irritability and lack of confidence.

1.9 Because the symptoms start during peri-menopause and periods may still be regular, many women may not realise that they are leading up to the change of life and seek the help they need.



1.10 A blood test by a GP or a nurse can confirm the menopause. Some women seek medical help through hormone replacement therapy (HRT), but there are some side effects associated with this treatment.

1.11 Some women may prefer complimentary or alternative therapies, keeping to a healthy diet and staying fit and active.

1.12 Women may also hide their symptoms because the menopause has traditionally been seen as a private issue and not generally spoken about openly – and especially not in the workplace.

1.13 They may feel that seeking help is a sign of weakness or that they will be subjected to ridicule or banter. The menopause will affect all women at some point in their lives – we need to ensure that our members know that the union is there to help them.

2. Action for employers

2.1 It makes sound business sense for employers to address the workplace issues associated with the menopause – most particularly by retaining valued employees and avoiding expensive tribunal cases.

2.2 Evidence shows that women have left their employment because of the lack of reasonable adjustments to support them during this time and/or because of harassment.

2.3 But there have been successful employment tribunal cases on the menopause, sexual discrimination and disability discrimination (see below).

Good practice

2.4 Employers can support workers who are going through the menopause by taking a variety of approaches:

- Train line managers and raise everyone's awareness. This will help them to recognise signs and symptoms of the menopause, implement appropriate adjustments and start to address the stigma surrounding the menopause.
- Environmental conditions: ensure suitable workplace temperatures and ventilation. Where appropriate, move workstations closer to windows or away from heat sources; provide air conditioning or at least fans. This will help women cope with hot flushes, daytime sweats, palpitations, headaches and dry eyes.
- Provide access to cold drinking water.
- Be flexible about rest breaks and provide adequate toilet facilities, including sanitary products. This will help women cope with hot flushes and urinary problems, eg the risk of urinary infections and irregular and/or heavy periods
- Provide suitable personal protective equipment (PPE) or workplace uniforms; use natural materials. Breathable material will help with hot flushes, skin irritation etc and is likely to be more comfortable.
- Offer flexible working options, including flexible start/finish times, options to work at home etc. This will help mitigate against insomnia or other sleep disturbances, fatigue and lapses in concentration.
- Adjust workloads/tasks to help tackle lapses in concentration, the need for frequent rest breaks etc.
- Adjust sick absence policies and practices to help prevent fatigue, sleep disturbances and generally feeling unwell. Women should be reassured that they will not be penalised if they need to take time off.
- Do risk assessments that specifically address menopausal symptoms and work-related stress. This will help prevent depression, anxiety, panic attacks, mood changes, loss of confidence and help to maintain workplace relationships.
- Train risk assessors in factors affecting women's and men's health and safety. This will help ensure that risk assessments are gender sensitive and take menopause into account.

- Ensure workstations are appropriately designed and computers are properly set up to help prevent headaches, fatigue, lapses in concentration, dry eyes.
- Encourage employees to take regular breaks.

2.5 Any of the symptoms of the menopause may well cause additional stress. Workplace stress is likely to exacerbate the symptoms, which will impair performance and could lead to a breakdown of relationships with colleagues.

2.6 Many of the adjustments outlined above are fairly easy to implement and may well benefit everybody. Some adjustments may only need to be temporary.

2.7 Employers should also be aware that many women will be embarrassed to talk about the menopause; a specific point of contact in the workplace would be helpful, for example HR or occupational health. Providing leaflets and sources of information is also useful.

2.8 A workplace policy on the menopause which provides support and adjustments would demonstrate an employer's commitment to tackling the stigma – as well as providing a safe and healthy workplace.

3. Action for representatives

3.1 Health and safety and equality reps also have a role in addressing the stigma surrounding the menopause. Being open and having conversations will demonstrate to members and potential members that we take their health and safety issues seriously.

3.2 It will also encourage members who need support to come and talk to us.

3.3 Reps may find it difficult to get employers to take the issues associated with the menopause seriously. There may be better acceptance from employers if it is raised in the context of health and safety and the need to carry out risk assessments which specifically address the menopause.

3.4 Here are some ideas on how to raise awareness:

- raise the issue of women's health with members, perhaps with lunchtime events, speakers, posters, leaflets etc
- raise the issue with your employer, either informally or through the health and safety committee
- challenge any jokes or other detrimental behaviour aimed at women going through the menopause
- health and safety reps should ensure that their workplace policies and risk assessments are gender sensitive and take the menopause into account; consider whether a menopause policy may be appropriate for your workplace

- carry out surveys of women members to find out the issues they are facing and what support they need
- carry out a hazard or body mapping exercise to investigate the issues affecting women experiencing the menopause (see our workplace and body mapping factcards)
- ensure a gender balance among representatives
- review workplace policies such as sickness absence, performance management and flexible working opportunities to ensure that they cover the needs of staff going through the menopause
- ensure the menopause is taken into account in your employer's workplace wellbeing agenda
- consider setting up a branch/workplace support group.

3.5 Employers may need to be reminded of their duties to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their workers – as well as their duty to prevent discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

Risk assessments

3.6 Surveys and research carried out by the TUC and others have looked at how the menopause affects working life. Many respondents said that their working environment and working practices made their symptoms worse.

3.7 It is therefore important that the menopause is included as part of an overall approach to ensuring health, safety and well-being for everyone in the workplace.

3.8 Employers are responsible for carrying out risk assessments under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations and for ensuring the health, safety and welfare of their employees under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act.

3.9 Employers should take a gender-sensitive approach to risk assessment, addressing risk factors and health problems specific to female employees. This means taking account of the experiences of women who are going through the menopause.

3.10 Risk assessments should be carried out in consultation with staff or their representatives.

3.11 General workplace risk assessments should take into account:

- workplace temperature
- ventilation
- toilet facilities and toilet breaks
- access to cold drinking water
- flexible arrangements for regular breaks.

3.12 Workplace stress is likely to exacerbate menopause symptoms. Employers should adopt a preventative approach to tackling the issue, such as the Health and Safety Executive's management standards.

3.13 Where workplaces have uniforms, dress codes or personal protective equipment, the materials used and the proper fit for women, and particularly for women undergoing the menopause, should be considered.

3.14 Union representatives are encouraged to raise the issues outlined in section two with their employers.

4. The menopause and equality

4.1 Health and safety and equality reps can work together to ensure that employers take the menopause into account in workplace policies and practices.

4.2 As well as employers' duties under health and safety legislation, employers also have a duty to prevent workplace discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.

4.3 This outlaws discrimination based on nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation.

4.4 Surveys carried out by the TUC and others have identified sexist and ageist attitudes and behaviours towards menopausal women.

4.5 Women have won tribunal cases based on discrimination related to the menopause, both on the grounds of sex discrimination and disability discrimination.

4.6 There may well also be discrimination claims based on age in the future.

4.7 Being a natural phase in a woman's life, the menopause itself is not a disability. But there may be circumstances where the symptoms meet the definition under the Equality Act as having a long-term and substantial adverse effect on normal day-to-day activities.

4.8 Where disabled people meet the definition under the Act, they will be entitled to reasonable adjustments in their workplace. Menopausal women may also be entitled to reasonable adjustments.

4.9 There may also be circumstances where menopausal symptoms may exacerbate already existing disabilities or impairments, for example:

- women undergoing treatment for cancer may also experience the menopause as a result of the cancer itself or as a side-effect of the treatment
- women with diabetes may not be able to tell whether fluctuations in blood sugar levels or changes in body temperature or mood swings are related to the diabetes or to hormonal changes due to the menopause.

4.10 These are just two examples and there will, of course, be many other conditions where menopausal symptoms may worsen women's overall health.

4.11 Disabled women will experience these issues differently so a sensitive approach should be taken. Employers should ensure their workplace practices are flexible enough to accommodate any reasonable adjustments that are necessary.

4.12 Negative attitudes in the workplace, including the menopause being treated

as a joke, may well be discrimination or harassment under the Equality Act.

4.13 Women may also be treated less favourably in performance management systems or sickness absence policies because of their menopausal symptoms.

4.14 It is therefore in employers' interests to ensure that they prevent such discrimination and that women can work safely through their menopause.

The first tribunal case based on sex discrimination was *Ms Merchant v BT* in 2012. Ms Merchant's performance was affected by menopausal symptoms and the company dismissed her. Ms Merchant won her case; the tribunal found that the manager would not have approached a non-female-related condition in the same way and that the employer would have treated a man suffering from similar symptoms differently.

Davies v Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service (2018) is the first menopause-related tribunal case to have been won on the grounds of disability discrimination. The tribunal awarded Ms Davies £14,000 compensation for loss of pay pending reinstatement plus £5,000 for injury to feelings.

5. Further information

- NHS: www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/
- TUC: Supporting working women through the menopause: www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUC_menopause_0_0.pdf
- The menopause in the workplace: a toolkit for trade unionists: <https://wtuclearn.tuc.org.uk/resource/menopause-workplace-toolkit-trade-unionists>
- My menopause doctor: Menopause and work: <https://menopausedoctor.co.uk/early-menopause/menopause-work-new-guidelines/>
- Menopause Matters: <https://menopausematters.co.uk/>
- Prospect: Body and workplace mapping factcard: <https://library.prospect.org.uk/download/2011/00340>
- TUC gender checklist on occupational safety and health: www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/GenderHSChecklist.pdf



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