

Menopause – supporting colleagues in the workplace

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is to raise awareness of menopause-related issues at work, and to help line managers support colleagues who are experiencing symptoms associated with the menopause.

Women comprise approximately 70% of the Council's 18,000 strong workforce so, at any given time, a significant number of women could be experiencing symptoms of the menopause.

Menopause is a natural part of every woman's life, but it isn't always an easy transition. With the right support in the workplace, it can be a much better experience, so it's important that managers understand the difficulties and anxieties that can be experienced by colleagues going through this change and provide appropriate support.

2. Definitions

- **Menopause:** when a woman ceases menstruation for 12 months. This typically occurs between the ages of 45-55 although it can be earlier. Menopause is a natural part of the aging process for women.
- **Peri-menopause:** the time leading up to menopause when a woman may begin to experience changes, such as irregular periods or other menopausal symptoms. This can start years before menopause.
- **Post-menopause:** the time after menopause has occurred, starting when a woman has not had a period for 12 consecutive months.
- **Premature menopause:** around 1 in 100 women experience menopause before the age 40. This can occur naturally or can be triggered by some cancer treatments and surgical interventions.

3. What happens during the menopause?

Women can experience the menopause in a variety of different ways. It's important to remember that, although most women experience symptoms, everyone is different, and symptoms can be fluctuating and be felt to varying degrees. However, around 80% of women do experience noticeable changes, and 25% of women experience very debilitating symptoms.¹

Symptoms can manifest both physically and psychologically, including:

- hot flushes – brief and sudden surges of heat usually felt in the face, neck and chest;
- sleep disturbance that can make people feel tired and irritable;
- night sweats – hot flushes that happen during the night;
- irregular periods and/or periods can become light or heavy;
- muscle and joint stiffness, aches and pains;
- recurrent urinary tract infections including cystitis;
- headaches/migraines;
- weight gain;
- palpitations - heartbeats that become more noticeable;
- skin changes (dryness, acne, general itchiness);
- osteoporosis
- anxiety and/or depression
- memory loss and/or reduced concentration levels
- panic attacks
- loss of confidence.

Overall, the period of change and associated symptoms can typically last for between 4 and 8 years.

4. Supporting colleagues from diverse backgrounds

It is important to consider the diverse backgrounds of colleagues experiencing symptoms of the menopause and approach each individual circumstance sensitively and supportively.

There may be specific issues to consider when supporting colleagues with other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 (e.g. colleagues with disabilities, colleagues from BME backgrounds or LGBT colleagues).

For example, some colleagues may be less inclined to discuss issues surrounding the menopause with male managers and women who do not have English as a first language may have more difficulty in

¹ Fit For Work, *Menopause and Work* [online], [accessed September 2019]

communicating symptoms or difficulties they are experiencing. Colleagues with a disability or impairment may experience additional complications as part of the menopause, for instance, for a woman with diabetes, hormone changes associated with the menopause may make it more difficult to keep blood sugar levels stable. Transgender men (individuals who identify as male but who were assigned female at birth and who still retain female reproductive organs) and individuals who identify as non-binary (neither male nor female) may still experience the menopause. In this case, please refer to the guidance Supporting Transgender Colleagues with reference to confidentiality.

There is no expectation that, as a manager, you will be an expert in this area but it is important that, in all cases, you take your lead from the individual concerned and approach the discussion in an open-minded and supportive manner.

5. Reasonable adjustments and other support

For some colleagues, going through the menopause can be relatively issue-free, but for others it can have an impact on their working lives and their ability to function effectively at work. Without support, this can also result in feeling less confident and more susceptible to fatigue and stress at work.

Each individual is different so it's important to listen to the individual's circumstances and think carefully about what support might be appropriate, including any adjustments you may be able to make. Remember, very small changes on a practical level can make a huge difference to the quality of working life for colleagues experiencing the menopause.

Listed below are some examples of adjustments and support measures you might want to consider and discuss with your colleague. You can also seek advice from Occupational Health where you both agree it might be helpful.

Possible support measures

- ✓ **Consider providing flexibility in working arrangements** for those experience debilitating symptoms. For example, where the role permits, allow them to work around their symptoms by offering flexibility around the taking of breaks or additional breaks during the working day, or allowing occasional homeworking when symptoms are severe.
- ✓ Those experiencing the menopause may find there are times of the day where their symptoms are more or less problematic, so it may help to **adjust start and finish times where possible** to take this into account. For example, colleagues with disturbed sleep patterns may find they are more productive with a later start time.
- ✓ **Provide flexibility around attending relevant medical appointments.** Where sickness absences are related to the menopause, it may be reasonable to **consider adjusting sickness absence thresholds.**
- ✓ **Consider any adjustments to duties that might be possible.** For example, hot flushes or palpitations can be difficult to cope with when undertaking certain work. Reduced concentration can be a symptom, so think about this when managing workload or reviewing performance.
- ✓ Where uniforms are provided, **consider offering additional uniforms** to ensure it's possible to change during the day where necessary. **Uniform requirements might also be adjusted** if practical, such as allowing the removal of certain items/layers.

- ✓ Think about how to **provide a more comfortable working environment**, taking into account temperature and lighting (eg better access to natural daylight can mitigate the impact of possible osteoporosis), to help manage body temperature. Make desk fans easily available and consider whether ventilation can be improved.
- ✓ Where possible, **provide changing/washing facilities** for colleagues to use during the working day if required.
- ✓ Encourage colleagues to discuss concerns and possible adjustments at one-to-one meetings with you and carry out a (stress) risk assessment to minimise work-related stress.
- ✓ **Be supportive of any anxiety or loss of confidence being experienced.** Ensure that your colleague knows that support is available and that you are available to discuss any related problems. Where necessary, **signpost your colleague to the Employee Assistance Programme and/or seek advice from Occupational health.**

Getting help, and self-help

Although, as a line manager, you are expected to foster a supportive environment, you're not expected to have specialist knowledge or to try and provide medical advice. Colleagues going through the menopause should be encouraged to seek professional advice and support, and to consider measures they themselves can take to help them cope.

If they haven't already done so, encourage them to consult their GP or other healthcare professionals to get advice, particularly if their symptoms are more severe. There are a host of external resources you can point to that may be useful. Some examples are listed in section 6 below.

Current advice also highlights the importance of lifestyle choices before, during and after the menopause. Lack of sleep, excess stress, unhealthy eating and unhealthy lifestyle can increase the symptoms of menopause. Steps that can be taken include:

- Eating healthily and regularly – research has shown that a balanced diet can help alleviate some symptoms of menopause.
- Drinking plenty of water.
- Exercising regularly, to reduce hot flushes, improve sleep, boost mood and maintain fitness levels.
- Stopping smoking.
- Ensuring alcohol intake is within recommended levels, and cutting down on caffeine and spicy food, all of which can trigger hot flushes.
- Staying cool at night – wearing loose clothes in a cool and well-ventilated room to help reduce hot flushes and night sweats.

6. Line manager responsibilities

Line managers should:

- Familiarise themselves with this guidance;
- Be ready and willing to have open discussions about menopause, appreciating the personal nature of the conversation, and treating the discussion sensitively and confidentially;
- Make a record of any adjustments agreed, and actions to be implemented;

- Ensure that all agreed adjustments are adhered to;
- Have regular dialogue regarding support required, including follow up meetings to review adjustments that have been made;
- Seek additional advice from Occupational Health where necessary;
- Signpost relevant sources of support, such as the Employee Assistance Programme; and
- Agree with the individual whether other colleagues should be informed about any adjustments that have been agreed (even if the reason is not disclosed).

7. Useful resources

If you would like further information about the menopause, or to signpost a colleague to, you may wish to look at the following websites.

[NHS Menopause Guidance](#)

Provides an overview, together with information about menopausal symptoms and treatment options.

[Menopause Matters](#)

An independent website which gives up-to-date information about the menopause, menopausal symptoms and treatment options.

[The Menopause Matters Forum](#)

Provides the opportunity to chat to other women experiencing the same problems and concerns.

[British Menopause Society](#)

The BMS provides education, information and guidance to healthcare professionals specialising in all aspects of reproductive health.

[Women's Health Concern \(WHC\)](#)

WHC is the patient arm of the British Menopause Society and provides factsheets about the menopause, linked articles (e.g. about experiencing a healthy menopause), FAQs and recommended further reading.

[The Daisy Network Charity](#)

A registered charity providing free information and support to women with Premature Ovarian Insufficiency, also known as Premature Menopause.

[Simply Hormones](#)

Provides blogs and articles about the menopause and opportunity to sign up to receive free Menopause Survival Kit, newsletters and updates

[Simply Hormones - Menopause: A Guide for Men](#)

Information to help men understand more about the menopause, including some "helpful hints".