

Menopause and the workplace

Menopause is a naturally occurring event in a woman's life. The average age of menopause in the UK is 51. It is not recognised as an illness or a medical condition. It is the point when a woman's menstrual period stop and the ovaries stop producing eggs leading to a drop in oestrogen and progesterone levels.

There are two stages to the menopausal period.

1. The peri-menopause - this is the time when women experience menopausal symptoms but continue to have periods.
2. Post-menopause- After periods have stopped. This is two years after the last period if a woman is under 50 and one year after her last period if she is over 50.

During the perimenopause and the menopause the oestrogen and progesterone levels fluctuate and this imbalance leads to the menopausal symptoms. Oestrogen protects the heart, brain, bones and pelvic organs, therefore low levels affect all these parts of a woman's body.

Symptoms of perimenopause start around the age of 45 usually but can be as early as 40 which is known as an early menopause or if below the age of 40 is recognised as premature ovarian insufficiency (POI). Although the menopause is a normal event if a woman has a hysterectomy with ovaries removed this is called a surgical menopause and increases the symptoms of menopause.

Symptoms of the Menopause

One in four women will not experience any menopausal symptoms. This means that most women will suffer with menopausal symptoms and a survey by the British Menopause society in 2016 found that 50% of women felt that their menopause symptoms had affected their home life and a third of women felt that their menopause symptoms had affected their work life. In the same survey 42% of women experienced seven or more symptoms and these were much worse than they expected.

Some women may only experience symptoms for a few months but for other women these symptoms may continue for many years. However, these symptoms may come and go and may have times when they feel completely normal. But, when the symptoms return they can be debilitating.

Although the most common symptoms of menopause are vasomotor symptoms, hot flushes and night sweats the knock on effects can be devastating. Hot flushes can cause

dizziness, lightheadedness and even heart palpitations. In the BMS survey 79% of women in the survey experienced hot flushes and 70% night sweats. 80% of all women experienced several symptoms of the menopause.

It is the psychological symptoms of the menopause that have the greatest effect on women at work. Poor concentration, tiredness due to night sweats and insomnia, poor memory, depression, low confidence and low mood are all contributing factors. Many women do not feel that their brain is as clear as it was.

Symptoms such as mood swings, panic attacks, irritability and no longer being able to multitask also affect a woman's ability at work. Physical symptoms through the perimenopause such as headaches, migraines, joint pain and heavy periods can lead to women needing time off work.

45% of women in the BMS survey felt that their menopause symptoms affected their working life and 47% have had to take time off sick due to their menopause symptoms but had not told their employer that it was related to their menopause. It is also claimed that 10% of women will leave work completely because of severe menopause symptoms.

There are long term health which can arise due to the menopause.

Bone tissue in women rapidly diminishes following the menopause. This is due to the lack of oestrogen leading to the loss of bone density. This leads to Osteoporosis and often a fracture can occur with minimal impact. The most common places for fractures are hips, wrists and spine.

Oestrogen keeps blood vessels elastic and as women go through menopause and lose their oestrogen so their risks of strokes and heart attacks increases as well as the risk of type 2 diabetes due to increasing insulin resistance.

What about the workplace?

In 2019 there were 4.3million women aged 45-60 employed and as the average age of menopause is 51 many of these women will be working through their menopause transition. Women are choosing to work longer and with retirement age increasing these numbers will continue to remain high.

Women feel embarrassed and don't want to disclose their menopause symptoms as they are frightened of being stigmatised according to a survey conducted by Griffiths et al in 2013 and this was reiterated by another study by Hardy et al in 2017 regarding women's perspective on employer and line manager support.

For most women their menopause symptoms last longer than they anticipated with the average length of symptoms being 4 years. However, for some women they may last 10 years.

Women themselves are often at the peak of their career when they reach menopause and often don't realise that the symptoms that they are experiencing are menopausal not stress of work or home life. Therefore, women may not talk about it and may not ask for help. Women have also reported that they do not feel comfortable bringing the subject up with younger or male line managers. Hardy et al (2018) found that some women would like to discuss their menopause symptoms and feel that is important that their employers and line managers are appropriately skilled to hold these conversations in an appropriate manner.

Other studies show that women during the menopausal transition are often mis-diagnosed with mental ill-health, fibromyalgia and other conditions affecting their attendance and performance.

The physical work environment can also affect women going through the menopause, allowing desk fans can help with hot flushes or keeping windows open.

It is felt and recognised that any support given to women going through the menopause should be individualised for each woman.

Menopause comes under the equality act 2010. Employers have a duty not discriminate against women.

What are the main issues at work?

- Lack of appropriate gender sensitive risk assessments
- Poor ventilation and air quality
- Inadequate access to drinking water
- Inadequate toilet or washing facilities
- Lack of control over environment
- Inflexible working time rules/ break times
- Excessive workloads
- Workplace stress
- Lack of awareness of menopause among managers and colleagues
- Lack of management training on women's health issues
- Negative attitudes
- Unsympathetic line managers or colleagues
- Bullying and harassment
- Insecure contracts

Examples of workplace factors which could worsen or interact with symptoms

1. **Symptom: Daytime sweats, hot flushes, palpitations.**

a) Workplace factors: Unsuitable workplace temperatures and lack of ventilation.

Suggested adjustments

- Ensure easy access to supply of cold drinking water and washroom facilities.
- Take account of shift or peripatetic workers schedules and allow them to access facilities during their working.
- Carry out 'thermal mapping' to identify hot and cold spots in the workplace and review office seating plans to allow workspace to be positioned based on suitability/need.
- Look at ways to cool the working environment for those affected, for example fans at workstations, move desks nearer to windows, opening windows and adjust air conditioning.

b) Workplace factors: Unsuitable uniforms or workwear; unsuitable or ill- fitting personal protective equipment (PPE), for example, face masks/ visors and lead aprons may be uncomfortable if worn for long periods.

Suggested adjustments

- Avoid nylon or close-fitting uniforms, provide alternatives made from natural fibres.
- Ensure all PPE is appropriate in terms of size and materials and that more suitable alternative are offered if needed. 'One size fits all' blanket issue items are unlikely to be suitable for all members of the workforce.

Suggested adjustments

c) Workplace factors: Lack of access to rest breaks or suitable break areas. Hot flushes and facial redness may cause women to feel self- conscious or the sensation may affect concentration or train of thought.

- Be flexible about additional breaks. Allow time out and access to fresh air.
- Ensure a quiet area/room is available.
- Ensure cover is available so workers can leave their posts if needed.

2. **Symptom: Night time sweats and hot flushes. Insomnia or sleep disturbance.**

Workplace factors: Rigid start/finish times and lack of flexible working options may increase fatigue at work due to lack of sleep (may be compounded if shift work is carried out).

Suggested adjustments

- Consider temporary adjustment of shift patterns or hours to accommodate any difficulties.
- Allow flexible/home working.
- Provide the option of alternative tasks/duties.
- Make allowance for potential additional need for sickness absence.
- Reassure workers that they will not be penalised or suffer detriment if they require adjustments to workload or performance management targets.

3. Symptom: Urinary problems, for example increased frequency, urgency and increased risk of urinary infections.

Workplace factors: Lack of access to adequate toilet facilities may increase the risk of infection and cause distress, embarrassment and an increase in stress levels.

Suggested adjustments

- Ensure easy access to toilet and washroom facilities.
- Allow for more frequent breaks in work to go to the toilet.
- Staff member may need to access toilet facilities more frequently; may need to drink more fluids, may feel unwell.
- Ensure easy access to supply of cold drinking water.
- Take account of peripatetic workers schedules and allow them to access facilities during their working day.
- Make allowances for potential additional need for sickness absence.

4. Symptom: Irregular and/or heavy periods.

Workplace factors: Lack of access to adequate toilet facilities may increase the risk of infection and cause distress, embarrassment and an increase stress levels. Staff member may need to access toilet and washroom facilities more frequently.

Suggested adjustments

- Ensure easy access to well- maintained toilet and washroom or shower facilities.
- Allow for more frequent breaks in work to go to the toilet/ washroom.
- Ensure sanitary products readily available.
- Take account of peripatetic workers schedules and allow them to access facilities during their working day.

- Ensure cover is available so staff can leave their posts if needed.

5. Symptom: Skin irritation, dryness or itching.

Workplace factors: Unsuitable uniforms, workwear, PPE or workplace temperatures and humidity may increase skin irritation, dryness and itching, there may be discomfort and an increased risk of infection and a reduction in the barrier function of skin.

Suggested adjustments

- Avoid nylon uniforms. Provide alternatives made from natural fibers with options for layering that can be adjusted.
- Ensure comfortable working temperatures and humidity.
- Ensure easy access to well- maintained toilet and washroom or shower facilities.
- Allow for more frequent breaks in work to go to the toilet/ washroom.

6. Symptom: Muscular aches and bone and joint pains.

Workplace factors: Lifting, moving and manual handling as well as work involving repetitive movements or adopting static postures may be more uncomfortable and there may be an increased risk of injury.

Suggested adjustments

- Make any necessary adjustments through review
- of risk assessments and work schedules/tasks and keep under review.
- Consider providing alternative lower risk tasks.
- Follow HSE guidance and advice on manual handling and preventing MSDs (musculo-skeletal disorders).

7. Symptom: Headaches.

Workplace factors: Headaches may be triggered or worsened by many workplace factors such as artificial lighting, poor air quality, and exposure to chemicals, screen work, workplace stress, poor posture / unsuitable workstations, unsuitable uniforms or workplace temperatures.

Suggested adjustments

- Ensure comfortable working temperatures, humidity and good air quality.
- Ensure access to natural light and ability to adjust artificial light.
- Allow additional rest breaks. Ensure a quiet area/room is available.
- Carry out DSE and stress risk assessments.

8. Symptom: Dry eyes.

Workplace factors: Unsuitable workplace temperatures/humidity, poor air quality and excessive screen work may increase dryness in the eyes, discomfort, eye strain and increase the risk of infection.

Suggested adjustments

- Ensure comfortable working temperatures, humidity and good air quality.
- Allow additional breaks from screen based work.
- Carry out DSE risk assessments.

9. Symptom: Depression

- **Anxiety**
- **Panic Attacks**
- **Mood changes**
- **Loss of confidence**

Workplace factors: Excessive workloads, unsupportive management and colleagues, perceived stigma around the menopause, bullying and harassment and any form of work-related stress may exacerbate symptoms. Stress can have wide ranging negative effects on mental and physical health and wellbeing. Performance and workplace relationships may be affected.

Suggested adjustments

- Carry out a stress risk assessment and address work related stress through implementation of the HSE's management standards.
- Ensure that workers will not be penalised or suffer detriment
- if they require adjustments to workload, tasks or performance management targets.
- Ensure that managers understand menopause and are prepared to discuss any concerns that staff may have in a supportive manner. Ensure managers have a positive attitude and understand that they should offer adjustments to workload and tasks if needed.
- Allow flexible/home working.
- Make allowance for potential additional need for sickness absence.
- Ensure that staff are trained in mental health awareness.
- Raise general awareness of issues around the menopause so colleagues are more likely to be supportive.
- Provide opportunities to network with colleagues experiencing similar issues (menopause action and support group).
- Ensure a quiet area/room is available.
- Provide access to counselling services.

10. Symptom: Psychological symptoms

- **Memory problems**
- **Difficulty concentrating**

Workplace factors: Certain tasks may become more difficult to carry out temporarily for example learning new skills (may be compounded by lack of sleep and fatigue); performance may be affected; work-related stress may exacerbate these symptoms. Loss of confidence may result.

Suggested adjustments

- Carry out a stress risk assessment and address work related stress through implementation of the HSE's management standards.
- Reassure workers that they will not be penalised or suffer detriment if they require adjustments to workload or performance management targets.
- Ensure that managers understand the menopause
- and are prepared to discuss any concerns that staff may have in a supportive manner. Ensure managers have a positive attitude and understand that they should offer adjustments to workload and tasks if needed.
- Reduce demands if workload identified as an issue. Provide additional time to complete tasks if needed or consider substituting with alternative tasks.
- Allow flexible/home working.
- Offer and facilitate alternative methods of communicating tasks and planning of work to assist memory.
- Ensure a quiet area/room is available.
- Provide access to counselling services.

References

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www.thebms.org.uk

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www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Menopause/Pages/Symptoms.aspx

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www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23

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Some useful resources:

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