



Supporting women through the menopause

Guidance for union representatives on dealing with issues around the menopause

The menopause and work

The menopause, also known as the 'change of life', marks the time when a woman's periods stop. It usually happens between the ages of 45 and 55 and the average age for a woman to reach the menopause in the UK is 52. Periods generally become less frequent, the odd period is missed and then they stop altogether. A woman is said to have reached the menopause once she has not had a period for one year. After this point, she can be described as post-menopausal.

This period can lead to changes in a women's health and may also lead to emotional changes. These can affect how a woman does her work and her relationship with her boss and colleagues. Unfortunately there is often very little understanding of the issues and very little support for women who are going through the menopause.

Employers have been slow to recognise that women of menopausal age may need special consideration and for too long it has simply been seen as a private matter. As a result it is very rarely discussed and many managers will have no awareness of the issues involved. This means many women feel that they have to hide their symptoms and will be less likely to ask for the adjustments that may help them.

This must change. The menopause is an occupational health issue, and one that is growing in importance. Women now make up almost half the workforce and there are an estimated three and a half million women over the age of 50 currently in work. That number will rise as the retirement age for women increases over the coming years.

It is important that trade unions raise the issue in the workplace and make sure that employers are aware of their responsibilities to ensure that the conditions in the workplace do not make the symptoms worse. Women who are experiencing the menopause also need to know that there is someone they can go to discuss any difficulties they are having.

What happens?

During the time leading up to the menopause the changes that are associated with the menopause begin. Some women experience almost no symptoms but around 80% do experience noticeable changes and of these, 45% find their symptoms difficult to deal with. The most common symptoms are hot flushes, night sweats and irritability. Without treatment, most menopausal symptoms gradually stop naturally. This usually happens two to five years after the symptoms start, although some women experience symptoms for many more years.

Every woman's experience of the menopause will be different but some of the most common symptoms that women may experience are:

Hot flushes which can start in the face, neck or chest, before spreading upwards and downwards. At night they are felt as night sweats. Most flushes only last a few minutes and the woman may sweat and the face, neck and chest become red and patchy. The heart rate can also become quicker or stronger.

Sleep disturbance can be caused by the night sweats, although it can also be caused by the anxiety women feel during the menopause. Sleep loss can cause irritability or lack of concentration at work. The menopause may also be linked to increased anxiety or depression.

Urinary problems may also occur during the menopause, and many women have recurrent lower urinary tract infections, such as cystitis. It is common to have an urgent need to pass urine or a need to pass it more often than normal.

Heavy periods and clots are common during the menopause and some periods may last longer. Most women will also experience irregular periods which make it harder for them to prepare for them.

Vaginal symptoms such as vaginal dryness, itching or discomfort are common. These happen not only during the menopause and shortly after but can occur in the in the period leading up to the change taking place.

Women's experience at work

In 2011 the British Occupational Health Research Foundation published research by the University of Nottingham which explored women's experience of working through the menopause. This showed:

- Many women found they are little prepared for the arrival of the menopause, and even less equipped to manage its symptoms at work. Over half had not disclosed their symptoms to their manager.
- The majority of the women felt they needed further advice and support.
- Workplaces and working practices are not designed with menopausal women in mind.
- Heavy and painful periods, hot flushes, mood disturbance, fatigue, and poor concentration pose significant and embarrassing problems for some women, leaving them feeling less confident.
- Women are not comfortable disclosing their difficulties to their managers, particularly if those managers are younger than them or were male.
- Where women had taken time off work to deal with their symptoms, only half of them disclosed the real reason for absence to their line managers.
- Some women said they worked extremely hard to overcome their perceived shortcomings.
- Others considered working part-time, although they were concerned about the impact on their career if they did so, or had even thought about leaving the labour force altogether.
- Over half of the sample reported they were not able to negotiate flexible working hours or working practices as much as they needed to in order to deal with their symptoms.

- Over half of the women felt that it would be useful to have information or advice regarding the menopause and how to cope with work from their employer.
- Temperature in the workplace appeared to be an issue for many women. Nearly half of the sample reported not having temperature control in their usual working environment. Some could not open windows, or experienced interpersonal difficulties doing so in shared workspaces.

However the research also showed that many women had developed strategies for coping with problematic menopausal symptoms at work such as obtaining fans or opening windows, adjusting their working hours or routine, active coping strategies, taking precautionary measures such as wearing layers of clothes, and having a change of clothes at work. Some women use HRT to help cope with the more troublesome symptoms at work. Nearly three quarters of the women who had tried HRT reported that work was one of the main reasons they had decided to try it, and 91% of these said it had helped. In addition they adopted more general strategies such as altering their diet, trying to sleep longer at weekends, doing more exercise, wearing layers of clothing, seeking out more information about the menopause, maintaining a sense of humour, and making time for themselves changes to their appearance as a result of an increasingly negative self image.

TUC research

In March 2003 the TUC surveyed 500 safety representatives on the issue. This survey found that 45 per cent said their managers didn't recognise problems associated with the menopause. Almost one in three respondents to the TUC survey reported management criticism of menopause-related sick leave, over a third cited embarrassment or difficulties in discussing the menopause with their employers, and one in five spoke of criticism, ridicule and even harassment from their managers when the subject was broached.

Respondents to the TUC survey said that the symptoms of the menopause most likely to be made worse by work were

- hot flushes (53 per cent);
- headaches (46 per cent);
- tiredness and a lack of energy (45 per cent);
- sweating (39 per cent);
- anxiety attacks (33 per cent);
- aches and pains (30 per cent);
- dry skin and eyes (29 per cent).

The survey showed that it was the working environment that was responsible for making these symptoms worse. Two-thirds of the safety representatives reported that high workplace temperatures were causing problems for menopausal women,

and over a half blamed poor ventilation. Other complaints were about poor or non-existent rest facilities or toilet facilities, or a lack of access to cold drinking water.

One of the biggest issues highlighted in the TUC report was the relationship between stress and increased symptoms with 49% of respondents mentioning this. Working hours were also cited as a problem for women working through the menopause.

What can employers do?

Women who are experiencing the menopause need support from line management. With any longstanding health-related condition this is crucial and can make a major difference to how a woman will deal with the issues arising from the menopause. Work can affect women working through the menopause in various ways, especially if they cannot make healthy choices at work. It is also important to remember that every workplace is different. For instance in some workplaces it is not possible to open windows or improve ventilation. Women who have to wear a uniform will also be less able to change the type of clothing they are wearing when they are having flushes or sweating.

The TUC believes that employers have a responsibility to take into account the difficulties that women may experience during the menopause. The Health and Safety at Work Act requires them to ensure the health safety and welfare of their employees, and they are required to do risk assessments under the Management Regulations which should include any specific risks to menopausal women if they are employed. They also have a duty not to discriminate under the 2010 Equalities Act.

As such women should be able to expect support and assistance during what is, for many, a very difficult time.

- Employers should ensure that all line managers have been trained to be aware of how the menopause can affect work and what adjustments may be necessary to support women who are experiencing the menopause.
- Employers can ensure that, as part of a wider occupational health awareness campaign, issues such as the menopause are highlighted so all staff know that the employer has a positive attitude to the issue, and it is not something that women should feel embarrassed about. Guidance on how to deal with the menopause should be freely available in the workplace.
- All women should be given information of how they can get support for any issues that arise as a result of the menopause. Because of the way that society treats the menopause, many women will feel uncomfortable going to their line manager, especially if it is a man, and other options should be available. This may be through human resources, or a welfare officer. Many employers have employer assistance programmes that can act as a go-between.

- Sickness absence procedures should make it clear that they are flexible enough to cater for menopause-related sickness absence. Women should experience no detriment because they may need time off during this time.
- Working time arrangements should be flexible enough to ensure that they meet the needs of menopausal women, who may require to leave suddenly. They may also need more breaks during the day.
- Risk assessments should consider the specific needs of menopausal women and ensure that the working environment will not make their symptoms worse. Issues that need looked at include temperature and ventilation. The assessments should also address welfare issues such as toilet facilities and access to cold water.

What can unions do?

Unions also have a role to play in challenging attitudes to the menopause, ensuring that their employer has procedures in place, and in offering support to women who are experiencing problems. Union representatives should raise the issue with their employer using the checklist above and ensure that the workplace meets the needs of menopausal women. Bear in mind that there may be specific issues in your workplace (such as temperature or dress code) that make it even harder for women who are going through the menopause. It is therefore important that you tailor any response to the actual needs of your members.

Raising women's health issues within the workplace will show that women can come to the union when they have difficulties. Some branches have run a women's health day which highlights a range of issues that can affect women in the workplace. You can also put up leaflets on the issue on union noticeboards. Having more women safety representatives or stewards also helps. Union safety representatives also have a role in ensuring that risk assessments take into account any potential health needs of women who are experiencing the menopause.

Further information

Several unions have produced leaflets or guides on the menopause. Contact your union or check their website for details. Leaflets for distribution within the workplace may also be available through your local NHS Trust. Useful sources of information include:

[Women's Experience of Working through the Menopause – BOHRF](#)

[Working through the Change – TUC](#)

[Menopause – Hazards Magazine](#)

[NHS website](#)

[Healthtalkonline](#)