

Understanding menopause in the workplace.

The menopause is a natural part of life, but doesn't always come naturally in conversation. This guide will help you ease your experience in the workplace and give you tips on supporting fellow colleagues.

A guide for employees.



The menopause is a natural stage of life

The menopause is a natural stage of life, and one people can experience very differently. You may go through it without any noticeable symptoms, or you may have a stressful time. Hot flushes, night sweats, mood swings and other troublesome symptoms can affect all aspects of your daily life, including work performance and attendance.

If the menopause is taking its toll on your health, it's important to remember that you're not alone and you don't have to suffer in silence. Around one in every three women has either experienced or is currently going through the menopause.¹ Around eight in every ten women will experience noticeable symptoms, and of these, four or five in every ten women will find their symptoms hard to deal with.¹

¹The menopause. The menopause is a workplace issue: guidance and model policy. Unison. www.unison.org.uk, published October 2019

If you're going through the menopause, it's helpful to know how to recognise the symptoms and how to manage them. There are plenty of ways to make this time of life more bearable for you – at work as well as at home. If you want to support a work colleague who's going through a difficult menopause, there are also lots of things you can do to help them.

About the menopause

The menopause is a natural event in your life when your oestrogen levels fall. During the time leading up to the menopause – called the perimenopause – fluctuating hormones may affect your physical and mental health. This can last for several years, causing irregular periods until they stop completely. You're considered to be post-menopausal when you haven't had a period for 12 months in a row.

In the UK, most women go through the menopause between the ages of 45 and 55, with the average age being 51. But you can go through early menopause (aged 40 to 45) or premature menopause (before 40). Premature menopause may happen due to surgery (eg a hysterectomy) or medical treatments (eg for cancer). The menopause can also affect people from transgender, non-binary and intersex communities, and its symptoms and impact can vary among different ethnic groups.

1 in 10
women have
menopausal symptoms
for up to 12 years.

Menopause: diagnosis and management. Context. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guideline NG23. www.nice.org.uk, last updated December 2019
<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23/chapter/Context>



Recognise the symptoms

Most women get menopausal symptoms at some point. Your symptoms may flare up and down and change over time. You may not even realise it's the menopause at first if you still have regular periods.

Flushes and sweats

Hot flushes are the most common menopausal symptom, affecting three in every four women. A hot flush will usually start in your face, neck or chest, before spreading upwards and downwards. You may feel sweaty, your skin may be red and patchy and your heart rate may be quicker and stronger. Hot flushes can last for several minutes at a time, which can be embarrassing and distressing, especially at work. Night sweats are hot flushes during the night and can affect your sleep.

Period changes

You may find you have periods more or less regularly – sometimes every two to three weeks. Very heavy periods can make you feel tired and lead to iron-deficiency anaemia. You may find that you need to change your sanitary pads or tampons several times a day.

If you have any bleeding in-between periods or after sex, you should talk about it with your GP.

Other symptoms

You may notice other physical symptoms too, including:

- poor sleep
- reduced sex drive
- vaginal dryness and discomfort
- urine infections
- an urgent or regular need to pee
- bladder leakage (incontinence), especially when you cough, sneeze or laugh
- joint and muscle aches and pains
- headaches
- weight gain
- dry eyes
- feeling very tired
- dry skin, brittle nails, thinner hair and hair loss
- poor concentration, memory issues and an inability to think clearly – it's often called 'brain fog'

In the long term, a reduction in bone density increases your risk of osteoporosis. This doesn't usually cause symptoms, but you may be more likely to break a bone.

Women also have an increased risk of heart disease after the menopause due to loss of the protective effect of oestrogen on blood vessels.

Hot flushes and night sweats affect up to 80% of menopausal women – and can last for seven years or more.

Menopause. Background information. Prevalence of symptoms. NICE Clinical Knowledge Summaries. cks.nice.org.uk, last revised March 2022 <https://cks.nice.org.uk/topics/menopause/background-information/prevalence/>

Menopause. BMJ Best Practice. Diagnosis - History and Exam. bestpractice.bmj.com, last reviewed May 2022 <https://bestpractice.bmj.com/topics/en-gb/194/history-exam#keyFactors>



Emotional impact

Mood swings are common at the menopause. You may be laughing one minute and crying the next. Or you may feel anxious, irritable or overwhelmed about things that you can usually cope with.

Increased stress at work may make your emotional symptoms worse. The menopause comes at a time when you may also be going through other stressful life events, such as bereavement, divorce or dealing with elderly parents. You may also be dealing with the pressures of childcare, or adapting to a change in the household with older children returning to live at home.

At work, you may struggle with poor concentration, memory issues and an inability to think clearly - often called 'brain fog'. You may find it harder to make decisions and lose confidence, affecting your morale and performance. This may lead to regular days off work and may affect your relationships with colleagues. At the same time, some women also say they feel a greater pressure to continue working through their symptoms, because they are worried about unfairly being seen as less capable if they are known to be going through the menopause.

Managers and employers have a huge role to play in creating a working culture where people can open up about menopause symptoms without such judgements, just as with any other health issues that employees may experience.

Women going through the menopause may become more prone to depression. So if you find your mood stays low for several weeks, contact your GP.

Over 1/3
of menopausal women say they feel less outgoing in social situations, and nearly a quarter say they feel more isolated.

A woman's relationship with the menopause is complicated. British Menopause Society fact sheet. Women's Health Concern. www.womens-health-concern.org, published October 2017 <https://www.womens-health-concern.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/BMS-Infographic-10-October2017-01C.pdf>.

When to see your GP

If you're struggling to cope, or you're getting menopausal symptoms before you reach the age of 40, speak to your GP. You may also find it helpful to speak to a counsellor. It can be hard to talk about some of your symptoms at first. But you'll find it easier to deal with them if you get the right help and support.

Your GP will usually diagnose the menopause based on your age and symptoms. But they may also suggest doing some blood tests to rule out other causes, such as thyroid problems.

They'll then discuss the best ways to ease your menopausal symptoms. They'll take into account your age, symptoms, overall health, family history and lifestyle.

Your options may include:

- hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or other prescribed medicines
- talking therapies, eg cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- self-help measures, such as having a healthy diet, exercising and keeping a healthy weight

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

may help to ease your hot flushes, night sweats, mood swings and vaginal or bladder symptoms. But it may not work, or isn't suitable, for all women. It also takes time to work, and your GP will need to get the dose, hormones and type of product right for you.

Menopause and its management. Patient. patient.info, last reviewed January 2018 <https://patient.info/doctor/menopause-and-its-management>

If you keep forgetting things, add notes and reminders to your phone or carry around a notebook so you can jot them down. This is also a way to practise mindfulness.

Guidance on menopause and the workplace. Faculty of Occupational Medicine of the Royal College of Physicians. www.som.org.uk, accessed September 2020 <https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/Guidance-on-menopause-and-the-workplace.pdf>



Help yourself

Some simple lifestyle changes may help to ease your menopausal symptoms.

- Eat a healthy, balanced diet, including around 700mg of calcium every day for healthy bones. Vitamin D (from sunlight, foods and supplements) is also very important as it helps your body to absorb and use calcium.
- Lose weight if you need to.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Exercise regularly – to improve your overall fitness, reduce hot flushes, sleep better and boost your mood. Weight-bearing and resistance exercises can help to protect your bones. Stop smoking (if you smoke) – to help reduce hot flushes and lower your risk of getting cancer, heart disease and/or stroke.
- Limit alcohol, caffeine and spicy foods – especially before a work meeting – as these can trigger hot flushes. Alcohol and caffeine can also affect how well you sleep at night, and too much alcohol regularly increases your risk of osteoporosis, heart disease and breast cancer.
- Stay cool at night – wear loose clothes in a well-ventilated room to reduce night sweats. Taking steps to help yourself sleep well at night is important; insomnia really reduces your ability to cope and think clearly, as well as being bad for your health more generally.
- Use a hand or desk fan, especially in meetings.
- Always have cold water or a cooling mist spray to hand. It can help to cool you down – especially on your inner wrists.
- Consider relaxation techniques, such as mindfulness or CBT, to reduce stress, help you sleep and boost your mood. There is some evidence that yoga and acupuncture can help some women too.

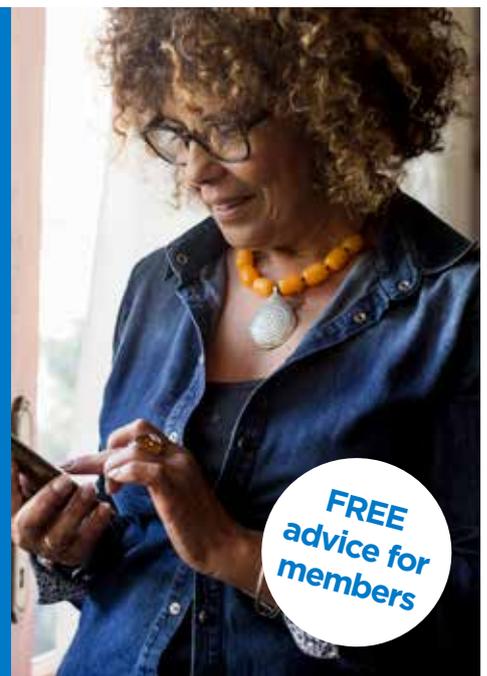
Looking for 1-to-1 menopause support?

Anyone who has Bupa health insurance or a health trust with us can speak to a menopause-trained nurse. They're on hand to offer personalised, clinical support, advice and answers.

Reach out to our Menopause HealthLine on:

0345 608 9984

Lines are open from 8am to 8pm, 365 days a year. Calls may be recorded and to maintain the quality of our service we may monitor some of our calls, always respecting the confidentiality of the call.



Workplace support

The menopause can have a big impact on your working life. You may worry that your symptoms won't be taken seriously at work, or be reluctant to discuss them openly. But the menopause is a recognised occupational health issue, including if you are working from home routinely. Working from home may make managing some symptoms much easier, but this very much depends on your home environment and your working set-up at home. For some people, working from home can also mean fewer supportive interactions with colleagues and managers.

Check your workplace policies relating to employees' health so you know what support is available. If there's no policy specifically geared towards the menopause, you could offer to help create one.

- Make sure you know who you can speak to if your menopausal symptoms affect your work in any way.
- If you don't feel comfortable talking to your manager, ask to talk to someone else such as a member of the human resources team. You may even feel more comfortable speaking to someone you work with more closely.
- You can have an assessment to make sure your menopausal symptoms aren't being made worse by your work environment or working practices.
- Discuss your symptoms with your manager or occupational health and ask for appropriate workplace adjustments.
- Contact your workplace's employee assistance programme (EAP) or counselling service, if there is one.
- Ask to have conversations in a private place where you won't be interrupted by anyone else.
- Report any harassment, victimisation or discrimination because of issues related to the menopause.

Don't be afraid to ask for changes at work that may help you cope more easily with your menopausal symptoms.

Practical changes at work

The practical steps below may be 'easier for you' when working from home than in the workplace, but this very much depends on your home environment. Some people will find things easier being in the workplace, so it's important to let your manager know what works for you and to discuss whether you can work flexibly, if your job allows this.

- Can you sit by an opening window for some fresh air or a breeze?
- Can you adjust the air conditioning or heating?
- Do you need a desk fan for when you have a hot flush?
- Can you change your uniform for something more comfortable (or natural fibres) or remove layers?
- Do you have easy access to toilets and washing facilities?
- Can you get cold drinking water when you need it?
- Is there somewhere you can rest or take a quiet break if you need to?
- Is your desk or workstation set up properly to reduce aches and pains?
- If your work involves long periods of sitting or standing, can you move around freely or take regular breaks?
- Can you take time off for healthcare appointments or leave early if your symptoms flare up?

- Can you start and finish work later than usual, or change your shift, if you have a restless night's sleep?
- If you aren't already routinely working from home, can you do so on a day when it would help you manage your symptoms?

6 in 10

menopausal women say their symptoms have had a negative impact on their work.

Let's talk menopause. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. www.cipd.co.uk, published March 2019 https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/menopause-leaflet_tcm18-55569.pdf

Supporting colleagues

- It can be difficult to know how to support a colleague during the menopause. Learning how the menopause can affect women – both emotionally and physically – can really help.
- Educate yourself about what changes are common during this time of life, and offer lots of patience, understanding and support.
- Not all women want to talk about the menopause but if your colleague does mention it in conversation, don't be embarrassed. Talking about it openly can normalise the conversation.
- If your workplace offers menopause awareness sessions, attend them.

Some workplaces appoint a dedicated 'menopause champion', who arranges menopause workshops and supports colleagues who are struggling.

The menopause at work: a practical guide for people managers. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. www.cipd.co.uk, published March 2019 https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/menopause-guide-for-people-managers_tcm18-55548.pdf





Amanda's story

“My main worry was experiencing hot flushes when I was in a meeting. I don’t just mean getting hot and going red – but actually sweating and feeling very unfeminine. It’s okay when you’re at home because you’re in your own space and it doesn’t matter who sees you in a hot spell.

The sleepless nights can be draining. I’d fall asleep okay, then just after midnight I’d be wide awake and wake up every couple of hours. On a really bad night, I’d get just three or four hours sleep and I’d

feel like a zombie in the morning. My manager has really helped me by changing my hours to be flexible depending on my sleeping patterns – if you’re struggling, don’t be frightened to ask.

Emotionally, I’ve sometimes felt like I’m on a rollercoaster – one day on a high and the next day on an extreme low. I’ve not been very good at dealing with this, but thanks to friends and colleagues it’s getting easier. You just have to realise it’s part of the process and you’ll get low days.”



Five tips to take away

Know your symptoms and the benefits and risks of HRT

Find out more about the menopause and treatment options, including hormone replacement therapy (HRT) – it’s easier to help yourself if you understand the facts. You can read more about HRT and other treatment options for the menopause on the Bupa website.

Help yourself

Some simple self-help measures can make all the difference to your physical and mental health.

Get support

See your GP for suitable menopause treatments, and speak to a counsellor if you’re struggling with emotional symptoms.

Talk openly at work

If the menopause is affecting your performance at work, talk to your colleagues and managers – they’re there to support you.

Practical changes

Discuss your practical needs with your manager, human resources or occupational health so you can all make suitable changes at work.

Further information

For information resources and personal stories about the menopause, you can visit bupa.co.uk/womens-health

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