

Women, Menopause and the Workplace

This will toolkit will help your business support women who are going through the menopause.

Women transitioning through the menopause may be experiencing symptoms that can impact their work life, so it is crucial that you as employers feel able to provide the necessary support and understanding to your female staff. Employers need to know the health and wellbeing implications of the menopause in order to effectively manage the ageing, gender equal workforce of the futureⁱ.

The average age for women to experience the menopause in the UK is 51, however it typically can occur between the ages of 45 and 58.ⁱⁱ In rare cases the menopause can happen before the age of 40.ⁱⁱⁱ 45% of the workforce over 50 are women^{iv} - this equates to almost 4.4 million women over the age of 50 in employment.^v

According to a survey of female workers experiencing menopause conducted by the University of Nottingham and The British Occupational Health Research Foundation, half of the respondents found it 'somewhat difficult' to work during menopausal transition.^{vi}

Nearly 20% of respondents surveyed said that the menopause had a negative impact on their manager's perceptions of their competence at work.^{vii}

It is vital that employers are aware of the health impacts menopausal transition can have on female employees. If female employees are not supported properly there is a risk they can bring a claim for 'sex discrimination' under the Equality Act 2010. Recent unfair dismissal tribunal cases have found employers culpable of 'sex discrimination' for failing to consider menopause symptoms in the same way as other medical conditions^{viii}.

"If performance were affected by symptoms that could be attributed to a different medical condition, there would be far more acceptance and allowances made" - Baroness Ros Altmann, Pensions Minister^{ix}

The following tips will provide basic information about the symptoms of the menopause, advice for managers on how to encourage communication around health issues and practical workplace solutions which will help create a safer, more comfortable working environment for women experiencing the menopause.

Symptoms

The menopause affects individual women's emotional and physical health differently. Being aware of the basic needs is necessary to support women going through this transition. The menopause can last from four to eight years and the symptoms may include:

- Hot flushes
- Palpitations
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbance
- Night sweats
- Skin irritation
- Irritability
- Mood disturbances
- Poor concentration
- The need for more toilet breaks^x

The health impacts of the menopause on woman's physiological and physical wellbeing can affect how they work, their relationships with colleagues and productivity. More specifically, menopausal symptoms such as night sweats, insomnia, lack of concentration and forgetfulness can lead to problems with work performance, difficulties in making decisions and decreased confidence, so excellent line-management and a supportive and understanding culture is key.

Communicating health issues

Menopause is still seen as a private issue. For some, discussing the transition into menopause is a difficult subject to be open about. This means there is very little understanding amongst line-managers and colleagues of the physical and emotional issues, and how these affect women at work. According to the University of Nottingham and The British Occupational Health Foundation survey, only 50% of woman who took time off from work to deal with their symptoms told their line-manager the real reason for their absence.^{xi}

“The great taboo of menopause should be discussed between employers and female workers as openly as any other issue^{xii}” - Dame Sally Davis, Chief Medical Officer

In order to encourage your employees to discuss health issues arising from the menopause, consider the following:

- Record any sickness absences that are related to the menopause as an ongoing health issue instead of a series of short term absences. This will ensure that your sickness absence procedure will not be unnecessarily implemented and will provide peace of mind to your employees when they discuss their health needs. Almost 1 in 3 respondents to a survey by TUC reported management criticism of menopause-related sick leave and over a third cited embarrassment or difficulties in discussing the menopause with their employer.^{xiii}

- Provide training to your managers and develop policies that will ensure management have an understanding of how menopausal symptoms may affect women in the workplace. 45% of respondents to the TUC survey said their managers didn't recognise problems associated with the menopause.
- Woman may suffer from exhaustion, anxiety and depression because of sudden changes in their hormone levels. This could affect their ability to concentrate and attend work. Be accommodating to flexible working requests that will help women manage their health issues.^{xiv}
- Embed an agile working culture so that women can manage their symptoms better, leading to a reduction in absenteeism and increase in wellbeing and productivity.

The physical environment

The working environment can worsen menopausal symptoms and increase stress at work. Problems are often caused by high workplace temperatures, poor ventilation, non-existent rest or toilet facilities and lack of access to cold drinking water.

- Be aware that the temperature in a workplace can exacerbate the symptoms of menopause. Offer women more control over their immediate work environment, such as allowing them to adjust temperatures.
- Refer female employees to occupational health if both parties feel that this is appropriate.
- Ensure that managers are aware of reasonable workplace adjustments that may be necessary to support women who are experiencing the menopause.

References

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- ^{iv} **University of Nottingham** (2011) Woman and the Menopause – A Guide for Managers
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