

**The menopause a manager’s guide**

The menopause is known by a variety of names but whatever it is called it is an unavoidable fact that all women go through the menopause.

The menopause refers to that time in every women’s life when her periods stop, and her ovaries lose their reproductive function. Usually this occurs between the ages of 45 – 55 and in the UK the average age is 51.⁵ In exceptional cases women may go through the menopause in their 30s or even younger. Some surgery such as a hysterectomy can lead to an early menopause as can radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

It is worth noting that symptoms of the menopause usually last between 4 – 8 years.

**Why should this be of interest to managers?**

It has been found that many women undergoing the menopause are little prepared for its arrival and nearly half found it difficult to cope with work during it.

With 3.5 million women aged 50-64 in work (Office of National Statistics 2010) this employee group represents a significant and growing section of the workforce. ⁴

Women are often uncomfortable disclosing their difficulties to their manager particularly if those managers are younger than them or male.

In cases where women have taken time off to deal with their symptoms only half have disclosed the real reason for absence to their manager. ⁶

For many women the onset of the menopause during middle age can coincide with increased caring responsibilities if elderly parents or relatives are in need of support often at a time they are still caring for children. ⁷

Employers are encouraged to break the stigma and taboo surrounding the menopause at work to create an inclusive working environment where employees and managers feel confident to discuss any practical adjustments that may be needed.

**Symptoms associated with the menopause**. ⁸

These symptoms can vary hugely in duration, severity and the impact they have on women.

Hot flushes

Palpitations

Night sweats and sleep disturbance

Fatigue

Mood disturbance, anxiety and / or depression, poor concentration and loss of confidence

Muscle and joint stiffness, aches & pains

Skin irritation and dryness

Irregular periods and/or periods can become light or heavy

Urinary problems

These symptoms may affect how a women does her work and her relationship with her colleagues. For example a bad night’s sleep can affect someone’s concentration while heavy periods or hot flushes can be physically distressing and embarrassing in front of colleagues or clients (Brewis et al 2017).

**Possible adjustments to consider :**

Review control of temperature and ventilation for example locating a desk near an opening window or away from a heat source.

Provide access to cold drinking water

Flexible working hours – if sleep is disturbed a later start time might be helpful.

Provide a quiet area to work, encourage regular breaks and moving around.

Where uniforms are compulsory, flexibility is helpful. This might include the use of thermally comfortable fabrics, optional layers being allowed to remove a tie or jacket as well as the provision of changing facilities.

In customer focused or public facing roles, it may help to have access to a quiet room for a short break to manage a severe hot flush.

Other possible action:

Facilitate discussion about troublesome symptoms. Employers can help by communicating that health related problems such as those experienced during the menopause are normal.

**References**

⁷Faculty of Occupational Medicine: Guidance on Menopause and the Workplace

⁵Women’s Health Concern: The Menopause

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development: The Menopause at Work

⁴ ⁶ Unison: The Menopause and Work