

Menopause in the workplace

A guide for members and reps

Introduction

The menopause is still a taboo subject for many women.

Everyone experiences a different menopause, and everyone should make their own decision about how to experience it. Employers have been slow to recognise the menopause as an issue that they ought to consider when designing workplaces, supporting employees or working practices. It's an issue many managers openly admit they don't know enough about, and employers must work to educate their staff about the menopause itself and the duty on them to provide adequate support and adjustments.

This is not a women's issue. It's a workplace issue.

This guide for members and reps is to provide information about the menopause, how it affects members and what the law says. Unions have a key role in raising awareness of this issue in the workplace. Reps can use this guide to support members and press employers to act to make workplaces more menopause friendly.

This guide has been developed following a survey of Community's members. The survey found that many members want to see a change in the way the menopause is treated at work.

Members described high levels of anxiety and depression, they described feeling unable to talk to line managers or colleagues about what they were experiencing. Women felt they were unsupported, pushed out of work, unable to access training or promotion opportunities. Women described being laughed at by colleagues, and so many women didn't realise they were in menopause for many years worrying they were seriously ill for another reason.

But the menopause isn't just a women's issue. Men are often in supportive roles with women family members at home, working with women colleagues who are experiencing menopause or in line management positions and potentially personally liable.

We need men to understand better what the menopause looks like, and how they should best support the women around them as well as helping to create the change in workplaces.

It's important for reps to be aware of how the experience of menopause can vary for different people. As a trans person, accessing support at work or medically can be difficult. Some trans people may not wish to disclose their status and therefore may be reluctant to discuss menopausal symptoms.

Emerging studies are showing that menopause symptoms can vary for people on hormone treatment for gender transition. Likewise, studies have shown that menopausal symptoms vary for black women. These are rarely talked about and medical professionals are less likely to know about them. It's important that these differences in experiences are considered when negotiating any menopause support at work.

Unions have a key role here; reps can support members and press employers to act to make workplaces more menopause-friendly and these resources will give the grounding to enable that work.

We are creating a fairer, more equal world of work for everyone. Join us.

Lauren Crowley
Head of Equalities



The menopause in the workplace

the business, legal and social justice case

The menopause is normal, a fact of life. But in many workplaces, it is a silent issue. Women are loathe to tell their employer they are experiencing symptoms. Women don't realise they are legally entitled to support, and employers don't realise they have a duty of care that extends to women who are experiencing menopause.

As union reps, what can we do to persuade employers to make suitable adjustments to improve the lives of working women? How can we change organisational cultures so that women feel supported and can discuss their symptoms with managers?

"The menopause isn't a talked about subject, I had to suffer in silence."

- Anonymous Community member

We have an ageing workforce with more women staying in work than ever before. There are 3.5 million menopausal women in work, and they are the fastest growing part of the UK workforce. Three quarters of women experience menopausal symptoms with a quarter experiencing substantial or serious symptoms.

"This type of stuff is really difficult to discuss with male line managers."

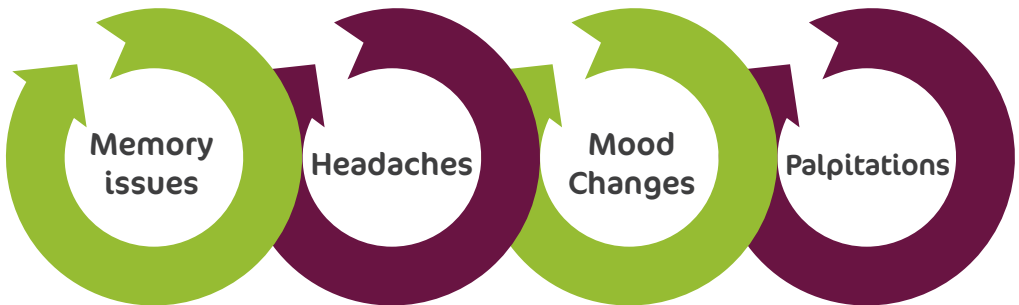
- Anonymous Community member

1 in 4 menopausal women have considered leaving work and it costs on average £30,000 to replace someone who leaves. For employers, there is a business case to support, provide flexibility to and therefore retain a woman employee who is experiencing menopause.

Legally, employers have a duty of care to their workers and legally must make reasonable adjustments for women under the Equality Act 2010.

Finally, enabling dignity at work is simply the right thing to do. While it might make financial sense and there is a legal obligation it's simply time that employers woke up to this significant issue which is impacting a growing part of the workforce.

The symptoms of the menopause



The facts of menopause



There are 3.5 million menopausal women in work and women are the fastest growing part of the UK workforce.

The highest rate of suicide among women in the UK is between the ages of 45 and 49.



3 in 4 women experience symptoms, 1 in 4 are serious. Symptoms usually last between 4-8 years and can be managed.

There are 34 known symptoms of menopause, but it is unlikely that people will experience all of these symptoms or at the same time. Some people may not notice any changes at all.



Not all women who experience menopause are of an older age, some conditions, medical treatments or hysterectomies can cause women to menopause earlier.

Experiences and perceptions of the menopause may also differ in relation to disability, age, race, religion, sexual orientation or marital/civil partnership status. It is important to recognise that people's individual experiences and needs could differ.



Not all people who go through the menopause are women. Some are from non-binary, transgender or intersex communities. Their experience may be different and they may be reluctant to discuss menopausal symptoms. Negative or discriminatory attitudes makes asking for help much harder.

The research around menopause

600 women members of Community answered a survey about experiences of menopause in the workplace.

43% said they had experienced depression

61% said they had experienced joint stiffness and pain

65% said they had experienced cognitive impairment, problems with memory or concentration.

65% said they had experienced insomnia.

68% said they had experienced anxiety.

73% said menopause symptoms impacted their ability to function at work and 74% said they sought no help at all at work.

81% said they had no support or adjustments.

85% said they had experienced hot flushes.

The role of the employer

Managers must not inflict their own bias when advising their staff

Employers have a duty not to discriminate under the Equality Act 2010.

An employer must minimise, reduce or where possible remove workplace health and safety risks for workers. This includes:

- Ensuring menopausal symptoms are not made worse by the workplace and/or its work practices
- Making changes to help a worker manage their symptoms when doing their job

Employers should give a worker the option of talking initially to someone other than their manager

If a worker feels unable to broach the subject with their line manager (for example, because they feel their symptoms are too personal), the worker could be given the option of talking initially to someone else with the necessary knowledge and training. For example, options might include:

“The anxiety makes me feel like I’m not good enough.”
- Anonymous Community member

- A member of the HR team
- A trade union rep
- A counsellor from the employer’s employee assistance programme, if it has one
- A menopause or wellbeing champion, if the organisation has one

The employer should carefully manage sickness absence or a dip in job performance

Managing absence from work should be handled sympathetically because the menopause is a long-term and fluctuating health change. Employer and worker should be prepared to make changes to help the worker continue to work, and minimise, reduce or remove any dips in their job performance because of symptoms. Best practice would be to not treat menopause-related absence as individual incidents but as an ongoing issue with broad support from the employer.

A worker should also be given a reasonable amount of time to adjust to changes and shouldn't affect the employee's performance management.

Legal information

In an employment tribunal, menopause symptoms have been accepted to be a disability.

Consequently, it is advisable, as well as being good practice, for an employer to consider making changes for a worker experiencing perimenopausal or menopausal symptoms.

If a worker is off sick because of the menopause or perimenopause, the employer should not include these absences in their attendance record. This means that absence because of the menopause or perimenopause should not lead to a disciplinary warning.

Employers and managers need to be aware that there are risks of disability discrimination and/or sex discrimination, and/or age discrimination if a worker is mismanaged because of their menopause or perimenopause symptoms.

If a woman is being discriminated due to symptoms related to the menopause, she may not just be a victim of sex discrimination.

“I was told I was too young to be going through the menopause.”

- Anonymous Community member

As the menopause generally occurs between the ages of 45 and 55 (although it can sometimes be earlier or later), the discrimination may also amount to age discrimination, and that is certainly worth arguing in any grievance.

As symptoms can include low mood and anxiety, and problems with memory or concentration, they can have an impact at work. If the symptoms have lasted or are likely to last, 12 months or longer, and they have a more than trivial effect on a woman's ability to do normal day-to-day activities, in some (but not all) cases, a woman who is going through the menopause might be a disabled person within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010, and thereby placing a duty to make reasonable adjustments upon the employer.

So, discrimination against women going through the menopause is likely to be related to at least two, and sometimes three, protected characteristics.

What should employers be offering?

- A policy or guidelines that set out the organisation's approach to the menopause and the provisions the employer will offer (you can download a model policy at community-tu.org/rep-centre).
- Awareness training for line managers and colleagues – (we recommend Henpicked – see more at the end of the guide). Be aware that not everyone will want to attend as it's such a personal issue. Employers should think about how to reach everyone.
- Reasonable adjustments – examples include, appropriate uniforms (although should be careful not to single out menopausal women), amendments to physical environment such as desk fans, flexible working, allowing working from home. The best approach is to offer a variation of options so women can choose what works best for them.

- Support and information. It isn't the role of the employer to provide medical support, but they should signpost where appropriate and provide good quality support and information to fulfil their duty of care. Employers should ensure there is adequate access to toilets, cold water, natural light and fresh air. Some employers set up informal support mechanisms such as peer support groups.
- Speaking out about it. One of the best things an employer can do is create an organisational culture where employees feel comfortable and supported to talk about what they are experiencing if they wish to. Whether this is by speaking directly with line managers for formal support or feeling comfortable to ask colleagues to help by opening a window or adjusting the office temperature.

“Insomnia, anxiety and exhaustion makes me stressed and less motivated and more difficult to go through interviews and other demanding projects.”

- Anonymous Community member

“I just struggle on and try to make light of it, although deep down I feel concerned as I'm not sure if I am getting dementia or the menopause.”

- Anonymous Community member



Case study

menopause at NSPCC

“At the NSPCC, we are committed to safeguarding our people’s health and wellbeing, and launching our working through menopause policy was another aspect of that commitment. We have a very high percentage of female staff, and we knew that colleagues had already started to query and ask us if we had a menopause policy or any guidance in place to support women throughout this time.

“Too often women suffer in silence as there can still be aspects of stigma around menopause and the effects it can have. We wanted to change this. We believe it is important menopause policies, risk assessments and in some cases reasonable adjustments should become accepted and commonplace for employers.

“To do this, we worked with a small group of people, including Community representatives, to develop a new policy setting out our commitment to supporting anyone who is going through this life change, as well as some practical advice and ideas to try and help relieve symptoms. We asked for volunteers to work with us and confidentially share their own experiences with us, both good and bad, and tell us their ideas and views of what would have/could help them manage menopause in the workplace.

“The policy launched in October 2019 and it has been extremely well received across the organisation. We have had dozens of positive messages and comments from colleagues, delighted that we have recognised and taken this very important step.

“We have also shared our policy with others within our sector who are also starting to develop their own approach to supporting women throughout this time of their lives. Ultimately, we would like to see menopause talked about openly at work in the same way as other significant life changes such as pregnancy are talked about, and our new policy is a stepping stone to achieving this. “

NSPCC Community Reps

A 10 step plan to support



1

Encourage women colleagues to join Community. Historical changes for equality are done collectively. Unions give us the strength to speak up together and protect each other.



2

Find out what support, if any, your employer offers. Do they have a menopause policy or guidance? Have existing policies been reviewed to ensure they include menopause, e.g. flexible working, absence and sickness?



3

Speak to your women colleagues or do a survey to find out how members are experiencing menopause and whether they feel comfortable accessing support from your employer.



4

Ensure your employer has an action plan. Ensure risk assessments take the needs of menopausal women into account and that measures to remove/control risks (eg. risk of stress) are implemented. Get involved and hold your employer accountable to its commitments. Work with the women around you/your union to get yourselves heard.



5

Work with your employer to foster a workplace culture where menopause can be talked about. Ask your employer to provide information through an intranet, a support group or through awareness and education sessions for colleagues. Lead by example and start speaking out.

menopausal women at work



6

Ask your employer to provide training to all line managers on what menopause is and what reasonable adjustments should be provided to employees who need it.



7

Negotiate adjustments like changes to uniform/dress codes that aren't prohibitive, being able to adjust workplace temperature, desk fans, access to cold water and toilets, flexible working or the chance for breaks. Offer to go to meetings with women who may feel uncomfortable speaking to managers about their issues.



8

Ask male colleagues to be the allies of menopausal women by speaking up for the changes that are needed or providing support to women they may line manage.



9

Sometimes, things don't go the way we'd like at work and we end up in a situation where grievances, disciplinary and legal cases arise. These can happen as much with issues related to menopause. Contact your local regional team for support.



10

Tell us about it! Your excellent work could help others in Community to make similar changes and improve the lives of working women. To share your work or for further advice and support email equalities@community-tu.org.

Resources

for reps and members

ACAS: www.acas.org.uk/guidance-for-employers-to-help-manage-the-impact-of-menopause-at-work

NHS information pages: www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause

NICE: guidelines for health professionals on diagnosis and management of menopause: www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23

The British Menopause Society – a charity aiming to educate, inform and guide healthcare professionals in all aspects of post reproductive health: www.thebms.org.uk

Menopause matters: www.menopausematters.co.uk

The Daisy Network – a charity supporting women experiencing early menopause: www.thedaisynetwork.org.uk

Henpicked: www.henpicked.net

TUC webinar on menopause support: www.tuc.org.uk/events/webinar-menopause-support

Thanks to TUC and advice from Henpicked, whose prior work on workplace support for the menopause have informed this guide.

For more information: equalities@community-tu.org



We are Community.

The modern union for a changing world.

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