



Menopause:

# Guiding principles for Employees and their Managers

September 2019



## Foreword



### **Antonia Romeo, Permanent Secretary Department for International Trade, and Civil Service Gender Champion.**

As the Gender Diversity Champion for the Civil Service, one of my top priorities is to build a more inclusive culture and improve the lived experience for women.

Menopause is not a new issue, but it is one that has always silently affected women in the workplace. Despite much progress on gender equality in recent years, a stigma has remained around the topic of menopause. Individuals can be reluctant to talk about it - let alone with their managers in the workplace. Starting the conversation, and adopting a more supportive approach, will bring about positive change for individuals, and for the Civil Service as a whole. This is important because workplaces can often lack the empathy and support needed, as well as the practical support for both colleagues and managers to help make a difference.

The Cross-Government Menopause Network is an excellent example of civil servants' commitment to inclusion in the workplace. The guiding principles set out in the document aim to raise awareness on menopause as a workplace issue and provide practical advice that can be translated into practice by individuals and line managers.

I am pleased that we can begin the conversation about menopause and start to break down the taboo around this topic, ensuring that we make the Civil Service the most inclusive place to work, for all of our colleagues.

I hope you find this a useful guide. I'd like to hear your feedback – please send to [GovMenopauseNetwork@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:GovMenopauseNetwork@cabinetoffice.gov.uk)



### **Marina Bolton**

### **Civil Service HR Director, Organisation Development, Design and Learning, Menopause Senior Champion**

The menopause is a normal life event for a woman. It's not an illness or a medical condition and it's certainly not the doom-laden metamorphic 'CHANGE' that it was thought to be in my grandmother's day! But despite great work being done to progress the cause of health and



wellbeing and diversity and inclusion in the workplace, the 'M word' remains a word that is mostly unspoken or in some cases seen as taboo. As a result, many women experiencing the peri-menopause and the menopause are doing so in silence. In reality this means some women living anything from between 2 - 5 years (and beyond for some) of their lives experiencing symptoms that can be physically, mentally and emotionally difficult and they live through it alone, not wanting to cause social discomfort or awkwardness by speaking up about what they are experiencing and how they might be feeling.

My own experiences are why I believe the work of the Cross-Government Menopause Network is so important. The principles and toolkit they have produced for use by women, line managers and colleagues help to bring an otherwise un-discussable subject out into the open so no one need feel alone or suffer in silence. Whilst the Cross-Government Menopause products are primarily aimed at information, advice and guidance relating to women experiencing the menopause, the toolkits are also relevant for anyone who might be undergoing any form of hormone treatment, as often the symptoms can be very similar.



**Jane Harbottle Chief Executive of the Legal Aid Agency (LAA), Senior Menopause Champion**

I am privileged to sponsor the Cross-Government Menopause Network. The impact of the menopause can be far reaching and can affect every aspect of a woman's life, including their work. It is important that line managers understand how to provide support for their staff. Supporting those affected by the menopause, maintaining their wellbeing and being a source of support is vital to ensure that everyone can achieve their full potential.

I am delighted that there is now a source of support for colleagues and line managers via the new menopause principles and toolkit. I would encourage all managers to use this resource and sign up to the network for further information, ideas and support. The products are an important step towards making conversations about the menopause easier between line managers, colleagues and peers, and providing much needed support.



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## Statement

The Cross-Government Menopause Network (Including NHS England/Improvement) is committed to ensuring that all individuals are treated fairly and with dignity and respect in their working environment. It is also committed to ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of the workforce. We promote a positive attitude to the menopause and will work proactively to make adjustments where necessary to support women experiencing the menopause and to ensure the workplace does not make their symptoms worse.

## Aims and Objectives

The Civil Service, NHS England/Improvement aim to be the UK's most inclusive employers and be representative of the public we serve. A brilliant organisation is also one where we work in an environment that supports our wellbeing. An inclusive workplace is one that provides everyone with a sense of belonging, allows everyone to be their authentic selves, and ensures they have a voice in their teams and the organisation.

The aim of this Cross-Government Menopause Network guidance is:

- To make managers aware of the responsibility to understand the menopause and the related issues that can affect staff.
- To raise wider awareness and understanding among employees across all our organisations; and
- To provide clarity and direction on how our respective organisations should deal with menopause related issues, either for individuals experiencing the menopause or those who are affected indirectly for example partners, colleagues or line managers.

The menopause largely impacts women in their 40s to 60s; however, we also know that it can occur at an earlier age. Other groups affected by the menopause include those who have functioning ovaries, such as some transgender, some non-binary people and some intersex people. Menopause can also have an impact on partners and families of those experiencing it.

The focus on the support in these guiding principles is predominantly directed at women, however it also applies to anyone affected by the menopause in the workplace either directly or indirectly.

There is a Toolkit to support this guidance for managers and employees.



## Introduction

The Civil Service and NHS England/Improvement have a commitment to be the most inclusive employers in the UK, and we have made real progress in gender diversity, most notably on the representation of women in senior grades and roles. However, there is a growing commitment for us to do better with policies to support and understand the lived experience of women. Whilst pregnancy, motherhood and family friendly policies are becoming woven into the language and culture of our working environment, there is little mentioned about menopause. It is important for line managers to recognise the particular needs of women at this life stage.

The menopause is not an issue widely discussed in workplaces as there are often connotations of this being a taboo subject for women, with associations of discomfort and stigma. The time has come for change and we should normalise menopause as a workplace conversation and encourage discussion about the broad range of symptoms; in addition to educating managers and colleagues on what menopause means in practice. We know that some women can feel that they must hide their symptoms and feelings as they may worry about their colleagues' perception of their competence at work, and they are therefore less likely to ask for the workplace adjustments that may help them.

Women make up 53.9% of Civil Service employees<sup>1</sup> and 77% of employees in the NHS<sup>2</sup>. They also outnumber men in both the 40 to 49 and 50 to 59 age groups. It is therefore highly likely that all employees will either work with or know someone going through the menopause during their working life.

The menopause marks the time when a woman's hormone levels drop, resulting in menstruation stopping. Because the physical changes in the body are hormonally based, menopausal symptoms can also be experienced by non-binary, intersex or transgender people.

Disability, age, race, religion, sexual orientation or marital/civil partnership status may also have a bearing on how menopause is experienced and managed. So, although it may be a natural life change, it can affect every woman differently, and understanding the psychological aspect can be central to understanding greater wellbeing of women in the workplace.

Not all women will experience difficulties in the workplace because of their menopause, but for those that do, conversations should be managed with discretion and consideration, with a view to understanding the broader circumstances and identifying where adjustments can be made. In some cases, this process will be better supported by an occupational health assessment.

The intention of this document is to raise awareness of the menopause, the symptoms employees may experience and ensure consistent support is made available to them across the Civil Service.

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<sup>1</sup> Civil Service Statistics, ONS - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/publicsectorpersonnel/bulletins/civilservicestatistics/2018>

<sup>2</sup> <https://pharmafield.co.uk/healthcare/the-role-of-women-in-the-nhs-in-england/>



## What is the menopause?

The menopause is a natural phase of life when women stop having periods and experience hormonal changes such as a decrease in oestrogen levels. It usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55 and typically lasts between four and eight years, although it can last longer. Every experience will be different, and menopausal symptoms can begin before the age of 40 years. Perimenopause, or menopause transition, begins before the menopause.

- Menopause: A biological stage in a woman's life when you have not had a period for 12 consecutive months.
- Perimenopause: The time leading up to the end of your periods when changes start to happen.
- Premature menopause: Can happen naturally, or because of illness or surgery.
- Andropause - The Male Menopause. (*Note the Andropause is not covered in this guidance*)

Although for many women this is a natural life change, for some women the menopause may be medically induced. Surgery such as a hysterectomy and/or chemotherapy can affect women at younger age groups, creating severe symptoms.

## What are the symptoms?

A GP can usually confirm whether a person is menopausal based on the symptoms, and a blood test to measure hormone levels may be carried out.

The physical and psychological symptoms of menopause may be interrelated and can create a 'domino' effect whereby one symptom can cause or exacerbate another e.g. hot flushes at night-time can disrupt sleep, leading to tiredness, irritability and loss of focus during the working day.

While symptoms vary greatly, they commonly include:

- fatigue
- insomnia;
- hot flushes and/or night sweats;
- clumsiness;
- irritability;
- reduced concentration;
- loss of confidence;
- mood swings;
- palpitations;
- anxiety and worry;
- dizziness;
- memory loss, problems with recall and/or brain fog;
- depression;
- headaches;
- recurrent urinary tract infections; and
- joint stiffness, aches and pains



On average, the symptoms can continue for up to four years after their last period, but around 10 per cent of individuals continue to experience symptoms for up to 12 years.

The physical and psychological symptoms of menopause may be interrelated and can create a 'domino' effect whereby one symptom can cause or exacerbate another for example, hot flushes at night can disrupt sleep, leading to tiredness, irritability and loss of focus during the working day.

Each of these symptoms can affect an employee's comfort and performance at work. Organisations have a duty to provide a safe working environment for all employees and therefore commits to ensuring that adjustments and additional support are available where appropriate to those experiencing menopausal symptoms.

## How can managers help?

Organisations can help by creating an inclusive, understanding working environment and increase awareness of the potential effect of menopause symptoms on employees.

Menopausal symptoms can leave colleagues feeling less confident and at odds with their desired professional image. Some may feel that their performance is negatively affected and will work extremely hard to overcome their perceived shortcomings. As a result, some employees may not feel able to talk about such problems with their manager.

- Employees are encouraged to inform their line manager that they are experiencing menopausal symptoms at an early stage to ensure that symptoms are treated as an ongoing health issue rather than as individual instances of ill health. Early notification can help line managers to determine the most appropriate course of action to support an employee's individual needs. However, it is not always apparent to the individual that their symptoms are menopause related, so an open, two-way conversation is encouraged to prevent any embarrassment.
- If an employee is unable to talk to their own line manager, they should request a discussion with an alternative manager, a trusted colleague or a trade union representative. Either the line manager or alternative manager/colleague/trade union representative will act as an advocate to agree and facilitate appropriate adjustments required. Where it is possible, a 'Menopause Ambassador' in the role of advocate may be able to join the discussion to offer support to the employee.
- A variety of initiatives in different departments such as wellbeing programmes and menopause guidance are also on offer. Further details of these are set out on the intranet of each department/agency.



## Managing confidentiality

Managers should remember that the effects of the menopause may result in the need to treat a colleague differently from other staff for a period. It is good practice to discuss with the employee how they wish any questions from their peers/colleagues to be managed. Confidentiality must be respected unless the employee indicates that they do not mind their team being informed in a tactful and respectful way.

## The working environment

The working environment may inadvertently exacerbate menopausal symptoms and increase discomfort at work. It is also important to consider the culture which includes the values and behaviours of the workplace as well as the physical space. Working in a team which demonstrates respect and consideration can mitigate the potential for negative experiences during the menopause such as physical or emotional issues.

The main types of workplace related issues are due to:

- High workplace temperatures, humidity
- Poor ventilation
- Perceived overcrowding and noise; no access to a quiet or restful space
- Problems with accessing rest or toilet facilities
- Lack of access to drinking water
- Dryness and lack of natural light

It is important for organisations to consider the working environment and to explore what simple, practical steps could be taken to ensure the workplace is comfortable and promotes an inclusive and supportive culture.



## Workplace adjustments

The **checklist** in the manager's section of the menopause toolkit can be used to facilitate a discussion between a staff member, line manager or someone who they feel comfortable speaking to. The checklist may be helpful in identifying any workplace adjustments that may be useful in supporting menopausal symptoms at work. Any adjustments can then be added into a Workplace Adjustment Passport.

It is best practice for employees and line managers to review adjustments on a regular basis as needs may change.

### Here are some general ideas on possible adjustments to consider:

- Change working hours, or consider remote home.
- Reduce travel and consider dialling into meetings.
- Allow for frequent toilet breaks, especially during long meetings.
- The need to take a break, get up and walk about where stiffness and joint pain is an issue.
- Recognise the potential problem of increased absence in the application of the sickness
- Flexible working allows an individual the opportunity to manage their symptoms by altering their working pattern absence policy.

The purpose of such adjustments is to provide a supportive work environment by removing barriers, wherever possible, that get in the way of an individual doing their job to the best of their ability.

## Managing absence and performance

Menopause in itself is not an illness but there may be times when the symptoms of menopause transition are severe enough to cause the employee to take sickness absence, or for it to affect performance. Because this issue is intensely personal, a manager may not be aware that any impacts are menopause related. A manager should make all reasonable efforts to ensure an employee is able to share information confidentially to help manage their symptoms whilst at work.

- If the impact of the menopause is resulting in the employee being absent from work, or it is affecting their performance, line managers and employees should consider if an occupational health assessment would be appropriate, to ensure the best support can be put in place for the employee..
- A workplace adjustment passport may be necessary, after which they can decide how best to support their member of staff.
- When managing an employee with a disability or prolonged sickness (such as someone suffering symptoms related to the menopause) line managers must always follow the departmental supporting attendance process.
- Managers should exercise discretion on sickness absence relating to menopause to avoid trigger point warnings, for example when someone suffers severe menopausal symptoms - they should always seek OH advice and/or speak to a HR caseworker for further advice.



## Health and safety at work

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (the Act) imposes a duty on employers to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees. Employers have a responsibility to take into account the difficulties that individuals may experience during the menopause.

Due regard should be paid to temperature, ventilation, the ability to move from sitting to standing to avoid stiffness and pain, toilet facilities and access to cold water. It is important that workplace stress is also considered and addressed properly using the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) stress management standards.

**For more help you can search your intranet site for Occupational Health, Workplace Adjustments and Workplace Adjustment Passport information.**