

Menopause Guidelines

Working through menopause: a guide to supporting women in the CRN

1. Introduction

Menopause is a natural part of every woman's life, however, it isn't always an easy transition. Usually, menopause occurs between the ages of 45 and 55; in the UK, the average age is 51. Whilst every woman does not suffer with symptoms, supporting those who do will improve their experience at work.

There are currently 3.5 million women workers over the age of 50 in the UK, which is almost half (45%) of the over-50 workforce (Office of National Statistics, 2010). Although it is rarely discussed in some workplaces, the menopause is a natural stage of life that millions of women workers are either going through now or will experience in the future and we are trying to change how we deal with this openly in the CRN.

There is also a legal responsibility for employers to provide support in line with the Equality Act 2010, and, more recently, the Disability Act. But it's more about the CRN changing the culture to ensure that all our staff feel supported in the workplace:

<https://www.hrgrapevine.com/content/article/insight-2018-01-29-the-menopause-and-the-equality-act-why-it-pays-to-provide-support>

2. Aims of this guidance

The aims of this guidance are to:

- Work towards an environment in which all colleagues can openly and comfortably instigate conversations, or engage in discussions about menopause in order to reduce stigma around this subject
- Ensure everyone understands what menopause is, can confidently have good conversations, and is clear how managers will support them, with additional support from CRN Wellbeing Groups, RWT Employee Assistance Programme and Occupational Health
- Equip line managers with greater knowledge of the impact of menopause on women, and better equip them to have supportive conversations with their staff
- Ensure that women working through menopause feel confident to discuss their symptoms, and ask for support and any reasonable adjustments to allow them to work more comfortably
- Reassure female colleagues who are experiencing symptoms that there is someone they can go to discuss their experiences and access support

3. Definitions

Menopause is defined as a biological stage in a woman's life that occurs when she stops menstruating, and reaches the end of her natural reproductive life. Usually, it is defined as having occurred when a woman has not had a period for twelve consecutive months (for women reaching menopause naturally). The average age for a woman to reach menopause is 51, however, it can be earlier or later than this due to surgery, illness or other reasons.

During menopause, the hormonal balance in a woman's body fluctuates and becomes unstable. In general, the body produces less oestrogen, and also less progesterone and other hormones responsible for regulating the menstrual cycle, leading to fluctuating physical and emotional changes. However, this process doesn't happen overnight, and can take several years, during which symptoms can vary and change. This gradual change is called the 'peri-menopause'.

4. Possible Symptoms

It is important to note that not every woman will notice every symptom, or even need help or support. However, 75% of women do experience some symptoms, and 25% could be classed as severe.

Symptoms associated with menopause include hot flushes, palpitations, night sweats and sleep disturbance, fatigue, poor concentration, irritability, mood disturbance, joint and muscle pain and skin irritation. Overall, this period of hormonal change and associated symptoms can last from four to eight years. Symptoms vary hugely in duration, severity and potential impact on the woman. We recognise that every woman's experience of the menopause will be different but some of the most common symptoms that women may experience are as follows:

Hot flushes, oestrogen swings high to low during peri-menopause, causing hot flushes and increased sweating at night which can start in the face, neck or chest, before spreading upwards and downwards. Most flushes only last a few minutes and the woman may sweat and the face, neck and chest become red and patchy. The heart rate can also become quicker or stronger.

Sleep disturbance, sometimes caused by night sweats although it can also be caused by the anxiety women feel during the menopause. Sleep loss can cause irritability or lack of concentration at work. The menopause may also be linked to increased anxiety or depression.

Stubborn weight gain and increased appetite, due to slowed down metabolism.

Urinary problems, many women have recurrent lower urinary tract infections, such as cystitis. It is common to have an urgent need to pass urine or a need to pass it more often than normal.

Heavy periods are common and some periods may last longer. Most women will also experience irregular periods which makes it harder to prepare for them.

Digestive problems including constipation, diarrhoea, indigestion, bloating, gas and new food intolerances

Problems with memory difficulty concentrating and poor memory may make some tasks problematic and different approaches to managing information may be necessary.

Joint and muscle pain

The menopause can also lead to emotional changes. These can have an impact on how a woman does her work and her relationships with her colleagues. Again, the symptoms may not be consistent and can vary from woman to woman, and day to day.

These include:

- Loss of confidence, difficulty making decisions or problem solving
- Low mood and irritability, generally feeling “down” and lacking in motivation and drive
- Anxiety, constantly worry about things, feelings of being overwhelmed
- Tearfulness
- Forgetfulness and brain fog
- Tiredness and lack of energy, general feeling of sluggishness
- Little patience and snapping at those closest to you
- A general feeling of “not being yourself”, knowing yourself that there’s just something not quite right

Unfortunately, there can be little understanding of the issues and a lack of support for women, especially in the workplace. We need to be able to openly discuss the menopause, what it is and the impact it has on women. We want to normalise conversations about this subject and reduce the stigma around it that some people can feel.

Some studies suggest symptoms are not always the direct consequences of hormonal changes during the menopausal transition. Instead a ‘domino effect’ may occur, where one symptom causes others. Both headaches and insomnia are identified as affecting concentration, whereas insomnia can be caused by anxiety or depression. Hot flushes have been said to lead to stress or depression, and vice versa. They might be accompanied or preceded by other symptoms like dizziness, anxiety and headaches. Other studies say weight gain leads to loss of confidence and to sleep apnoea.

Overall, though, the evidence suggests a wide range of symptoms characterise menopause transition. It also indicates their negative effects on women’s quality of working life and performance at work, whatever the origins of these symptoms.

5. Effects on work

Effects at work can include:

- reduced engagement with work
- reduced job satisfaction
- reduced commitment to the organisation
- higher sickness absence
- an increased desire to leave work altogether

The evidence suggests that transition symptoms might also have negative effects on:

- time management
- emotional resilience
- ability to complete tasks effectively

6. How managers can provide support at work

Though it affects the majority of women and is a natural part of the ageing process, the menopause is still not widely discussed at work, and many women are often uncomfortable disclosing their difficulties to their managers, (particularly if those managers are younger than them or male).

Please bear in mind that not everyone wants to talk about issues so personal to them, but if you are a manager and someone does want to, you need to listen and be understanding of the issue. It might be possible to provide practical support such as making any necessary changes to the office environment to address physical effects, manage stress levels and manage any problems that they are having with memory or concentration.

You could also signpost them to helplines and sources of advice and guidance for managing their symptoms and lifestyle either through the RWT route (Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or Occupational Health (OH)), or via the CRN Workshops.

Menopausal women may experience bouts of feeling unwell at work, so managers should take a flexible and sympathetic approach to requests for a break or let them return home if they become unwell at work.

We also want to provide an open and supportive organisational culture that allows the provision of informal support for mid-life women during menopause transition, so please signpost people to the CRN WM Menopause Group, or to RWT support mechanisms (EAP / OH).

Practical help:

We recognise that symptoms can fluctuate and are a temporary and normal phase of a woman's life, so will not last forever. Managers should be led by their staff member in terms of what supportive measures they feel will help.

- Where possible some practical ideas to think about include adequate ventilation access to fans, good ventilation including windows which open and blinds that can be drawn, ability to control temperature via air conditioning or heating, again to alleviate difficulties caused by hot flushes.
- Access to cold drinking water to allow better management of hot flushes
- Clean, well-equipped and comfortable toilet facilities near work stations
- Working environment;- a reduction of exposure to noise to help reduce fatigue
- Quiet workplace rest areas

7. Further support and information

[Menopause Blog](#) by Assistant Project Manager Jane Mitchell

NHS guidelines

Various menopause websites

Employee Assistance Programme

Occupational Health

<https://www.menopausematters.co.uk/>

<https://thebms.org.uk/publications/nice-guideline/>

Natural remedies: <https://blog.cytoplan.co.uk/nutritional-health-in-the-over-50s/>