



# Supporting employees through the menopause: a guide for managers

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# The menopause is a natural stage of life

In an ideal world, it's one that we would all feel able to talk comfortably about.<sup>1</sup> Yet many women continue to experience difficult menopause symptoms in silence, especially in the work environment.<sup>1</sup>

Two-thirds of women feel their menopausal symptoms have had a negative impact on their work.<sup>2</sup> Yet almost half of women who needed a day off due to menopause symptoms said they wouldn't tell their employer the real reason.<sup>3</sup>

Here we provide guidance to help you support any team members experiencing menopausal symptoms, encourage open conversations, and create a better working environment for women at this time of life.



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## Know the facts

Some women may find it daunting to discuss the menopause with someone who knows little about it.<sup>1</sup> So, the first step to providing support is to understand how the menopause affects people's lives.<sup>1</sup> This will help to make you more approachable and give you the confidence to discuss any issues with your employees.

It's also worth considering that many people who start to experience menopausal symptoms may still be learning about the menopause themselves. So, providing information and raising awareness within your workplace could make a difference for everyone; whether they're experiencing the menopause themselves, or in a position where they could support colleagues who are.

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**The menopause can also affect people from transgender, non-binary and intersex communities, and its symptoms and impact can vary among different ethnic groups.<sup>4,8</sup>**

### What is the menopause?

At the menopause, a woman's oestrogen levels fall and she stops having periods.<sup>4</sup> During the time leading up to the menopause – the perimenopause – hormonal changes can cause several physical and psychological symptoms.<sup>4,5</sup> Some women have mild or no symptoms, but others may have severe symptoms and find it hard to cope.<sup>6</sup> The perimenopause can last for several years, affecting a woman's performance and attendance at work.<sup>7</sup>

In the UK, most women go through the menopause between the ages of 45 and 55, with the average age being 51.<sup>4,6</sup> Younger women can be affected too, by early menopause (aged 40 to 45) or premature menopause (before the age of 40).<sup>4</sup>

Premature menopause may happen due to surgery (for example, a hysterectomy) or medical treatments (for example, for cancer).<sup>6</sup>

## Understand the symptoms

Every woman experiences the perimenopause differently, and her symptoms may flare up and down and change over time.<sup>1</sup> Some people treat their symptoms with hormone replacement therapy (HRT), while all women will benefit from looking at their lifestyle and making helpful changes to ease menopause symptoms.<sup>6</sup> Common menopausal symptoms include:

- hot flushes (a sudden feeling of heat in the face, neck, and chest)<sup>5,9</sup>
- aches and pains<sup>6</sup>
- an urgent or regular need to urinate<sup>9</sup>
- irregular or very heavy periods<sup>7,9</sup>
- poor sleep and night sweats<sup>9</sup>
- poor concentration, memory issues and an inability to think clearly – often called ‘brain fog’.<sup>6,10</sup>

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## Hot flushes and night sweats affect around 80% of menopausal women – and can last for seven years or more.<sup>5,13</sup>

Many women also experience mood changes, feel low or anxious, and increased stress at work can make this worse.<sup>9</sup> Without treatment or support, menopausal symptoms can make it harder for women to cope at work, lowering their confidence and interfering with relationships with colleagues and at home.<sup>7,11</sup>

This may affect their morale and performance and lead to days off. Or, some women may continue to work despite symptoms, due to worries about ‘keeping up’ with colleagues and at home.<sup>7</sup> The menopause comes at a time when women may be going through other stressful life events, such as bereavement, divorce or dealing with elderly parents.<sup>12</sup>

They may also have childcare responsibilities, either for younger children or adapting to a change in the household with older children returning to live at home.<sup>12</sup>



**Two-thirds of menopausal women say their symptoms have had a negative impact on their work.<sup>2</sup>**



## How can you help employees?

Treat the menopause with the same support and understanding as you would treat any other ongoing health concerns affecting your employees.<sup>11</sup>

The menopause can be a particularly sensitive and personal issue, and some women may be worried that they could be stigmatised by colleagues.<sup>14</sup> So it needs to be handled with care.<sup>14</sup> Normalising the menopause in your workplace shows it's being taken seriously, and women shouldn't be embarrassed to bring up the topic.<sup>7,14</sup>

### Make a statement

The menopause is a recognised occupational health issue and a gender and age equality issue.<sup>11</sup> Use workplace guidance to show that your business is committed to supporting your employees during all stages of a woman's life.<sup>11</sup>

Review or update existing health and safety policies or frameworks, or create new ones, to consider the needs of workers of all ages.<sup>11</sup>

If you don't have specific menopause policies in place, create a general wellbeing policy that recognises the menopause as a key health issue.<sup>14</sup>

Check that flexible working and sickness absence policies cover women going through the menopause.<sup>15</sup>

Make sure people know who they can speak to if they're experiencing any menopausal symptoms that do, or could, affect their work in any way.<sup>1</sup>

One way to make sure menopause symptoms aren't being made worse by the work environment, or by working practices, is to carry out a workplace assessment.<sup>1</sup> The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) website has templates you can use which cover both physical and mental wellbeing risks, including for home workers.<sup>16</sup>

Have regular, informal one-to-one chats with your team members to encourage conversations about any issues (including health) that may be affecting their work.<sup>1</sup>

# 1 in 4

**menopausal women say they don't get the support they need from their manager.<sup>2</sup>**



### Find practical solutions

Managers, or the person responsible for occupational health, may need to put specific measures in place that will help people cope with menopausal symptoms.<sup>1,12</sup> Even simple changes to a working environment can make a big difference, enabling everyone to perform at their full potential.<sup>1</sup> Some changes may be physical ones, such as providing new equipment, while others may involve being more flexible with certain procedures.<sup>1</sup>

For some employees, following practical steps will be easier to do when working from home than in the workplace. But this very much depends on their home environment. For others, being at their workplace may be much better. It's important to support people in working from the most comfortable environment for them, when work duties allow some flexibility.<sup>19</sup>

### Things to think about

- Can they sit by a window that opens for some fresh air or a breeze?<sup>17</sup>
- Can they adjust the air conditioning or heating?<sup>1</sup>
- Do they need a desk fan for when they have a hot flush?<sup>14</sup>
- Can they change their uniform for something more comfortable (or made from natural fibres), or remove layers?<sup>1,7</sup> Nylon or close-fitting materials may worsen hot flushes or cause skin irritation.<sup>15</sup>
- Do they have easy access to toilets and washing facilities?<sup>14</sup> Bladder leakage (stress incontinence) may get worse during the menopause.<sup>6</sup>
- Is cold drinking water readily available – at desks and workstations, during meetings or when travelling?<sup>1</sup>
- Is there somewhere they can rest or take a quiet break if they need to?<sup>1</sup> Hot flushes can be very uncomfortable, embarrassing and distressing, and some menopausal people get very tired.<sup>9,15</sup> Mindfulness, meditation and other relaxation techniques may help to reduce stress levels.<sup>12,20</sup>
- Is their desk or workstation set up properly to reduce aches and pains?<sup>18</sup> This can be an especially important consideration when people are working from home.
- If their work involves long periods of sitting or standing, can they move around freely, or take regular breaks?<sup>1</sup>
- Can they take time off for healthcare appointments or leave early if their symptoms flare up?<sup>1</sup>
- Can they start and finish work later than usual, or change their shift if they have a restless night's sleep?<sup>17</sup>
- If they aren't working from home already, do they have the option to do so on a day when it would help them to manage symptoms?<sup>1</sup>

## Open up conversations

If team members are struggling with menopausal symptoms, they need to know that help and support is readily available.<sup>1</sup> There's no 'one size fits all' approach though, and some women may find it easier than others to discuss the menopause with their colleagues or managers.<sup>1,14</sup>

- Give employees the option of speaking to someone other than their manager, especially if their manager is younger.<sup>12</sup> Some people may feel more comfortable speaking to a colleague they work with more closely, while others may feel more able to talk openly with someone from a completely different part of the organisation who has no influence over their role.<sup>17</sup> Team members may appreciate, for example, the chance to have a mentor who has been through similar life experiences.<sup>6</sup>
- Treat each team member as an individual, as the menopause affects everyone differently.<sup>14</sup>
- The menopause is a sensitive topic, so any conversations should be held in a private area where there won't be any interruptions.<sup>1</sup>
- Don't offer medical advice but do offer support. Suggest employees see their GP if their symptoms are affecting their daily life.<sup>15</sup> Signpost those who need support to an employee assistance programme (EAP) or counselling service, if these are available.<sup>1,15</sup>
- Reassure your team that discussions about their health, including the menopause, will always remain confidential.<sup>1</sup> Information will only be shared if they consent to this.<sup>1</sup>

Around

**1 in 3**

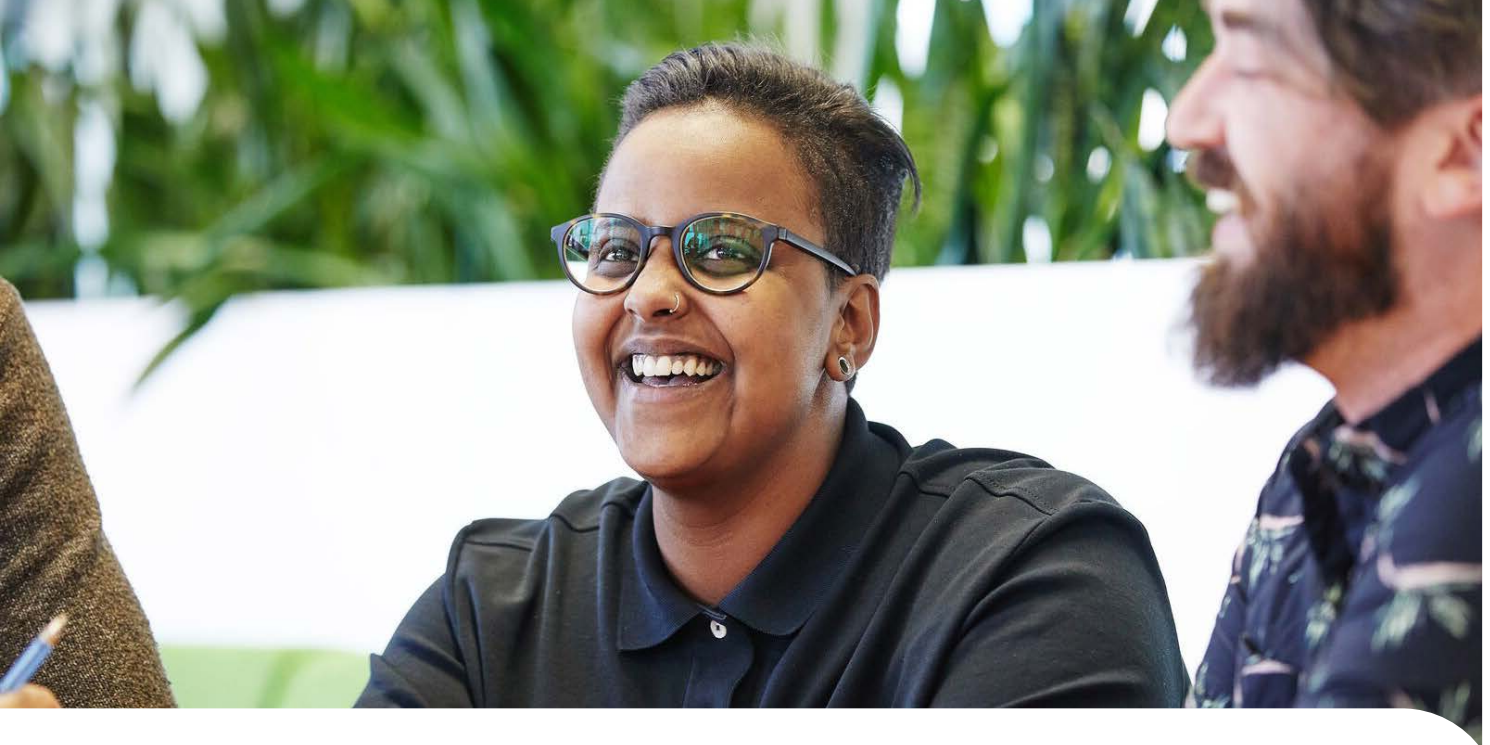
**women has either experienced or is currently going through the menopause.<sup>7</sup>**

Around

**8 in 10**

**women will experience noticeable symptoms, and of these, 45% will find their symptoms hard to deal with.<sup>18</sup>**

**The symptoms (and impact) of the menopause can vary over time.<sup>1</sup> So you'll need to have regular discussions to make sure your team member's needs continue to be met.<sup>1</sup>**



## Supporting all of your team

Check how much your team know about the menopause and address any gaps in their knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Challenge any negative attitudes and discrimination.<sup>18</sup>

This isn't just an issue for women.<sup>11</sup> Men may want to learn more about the menopause too, to support their colleagues, family, and friends.<sup>11</sup> And remember that trans men and non-binary people may also go through the menopause.

Train managers to be confident about having sensitive conversations with their team, showing empathy and understanding.<sup>1</sup>

Direct your employees to suitable evidence-based resources on the menopause.<sup>14</sup>

This may help avoid the sharing of poor quality information about the menopause.<sup>14</sup>

### Julie's story

"In the past six months, I've struggled with brain fog, tiredness due to waking multiple times each night (caused by sweats), and hot flushes during the day too. The brain fog is the most frustrating when you're used to clear, sharp thinking – you can't even remember what you've just said to someone.

I'm now medicated, which helps. But what has helped most has been the understanding of my manager. He performed a risk assessment for me and put things into place that will help.

If I've struggled with sleep and can't function properly, I can call in and slide my shift if necessary. I can take time out if mood swings get to me – just a quick walk around the building can help.

I've extra support if I need it to do my job. I've now got a fan, paid for by the company, and I do feel supported. If all management were this understanding, it would massively help women who are going through the menopause."





## Champion the menopause

Identify a supportive colleague and create a dedicated 'menopause champion' role in your business.<sup>1</sup> Make it clear who this is and how they can be contacted.<sup>21</sup> This person could be responsible for:

- organising menopause training and workshops<sup>21</sup>
- using posters to let employees know support is readily available<sup>21</sup>
- overseeing health and safety risk assessments<sup>21</sup>
- creating an informal support network for menopausal people<sup>21</sup>

### Sally's story

"I went into a relatively early menopause at around the age of 43. I had a whole myriad of symptoms, including feeling as though my core temperature had just risen overall, resulting in never feeling the cold and always being hot (dreading the summer).

I made a point of educating myself on all things menopause to help myself and allay any fears that try to creep in. I'm able to provide understanding and reassurance to other people. On a few occasions, I've had colleagues say things like, 'Thank goodness, it's good to know that this or that is normal and not something to worry about.' I try to get them to talk about it and not suffer in silence or in fear."





## Five tips to take away

### 1. Normalise the menopause

Dispel any taboos by making sure your whole team knows about key menopausal symptoms and how these can affect people at work.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Update policies

Check that your business's health and safety, wellbeing and team absence policies and frameworks recognise the menopause as a health issue.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Be open

Raise awareness of the menopause at work, and encourage conversations, so team members know they can ask for support if they need it.

### 4. Be practical

Conduct a workplace assessment and make any necessary changes that could help to ease employees' menopausal symptoms while they're at work.<sup>1</sup>

### 5. Be flexible

If a team member's work performance or attendance dips suddenly ask how they're doing generally. There may be underlying health issues, including the menopause, but don't make assumptions.<sup>1</sup>

# Resources

## Further information

For information resources and personal stories about the menopause, you can visit [bupa.co.uk/health-information/womens-health](https://www.bupa.co.uk/health-information/womens-health)

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