

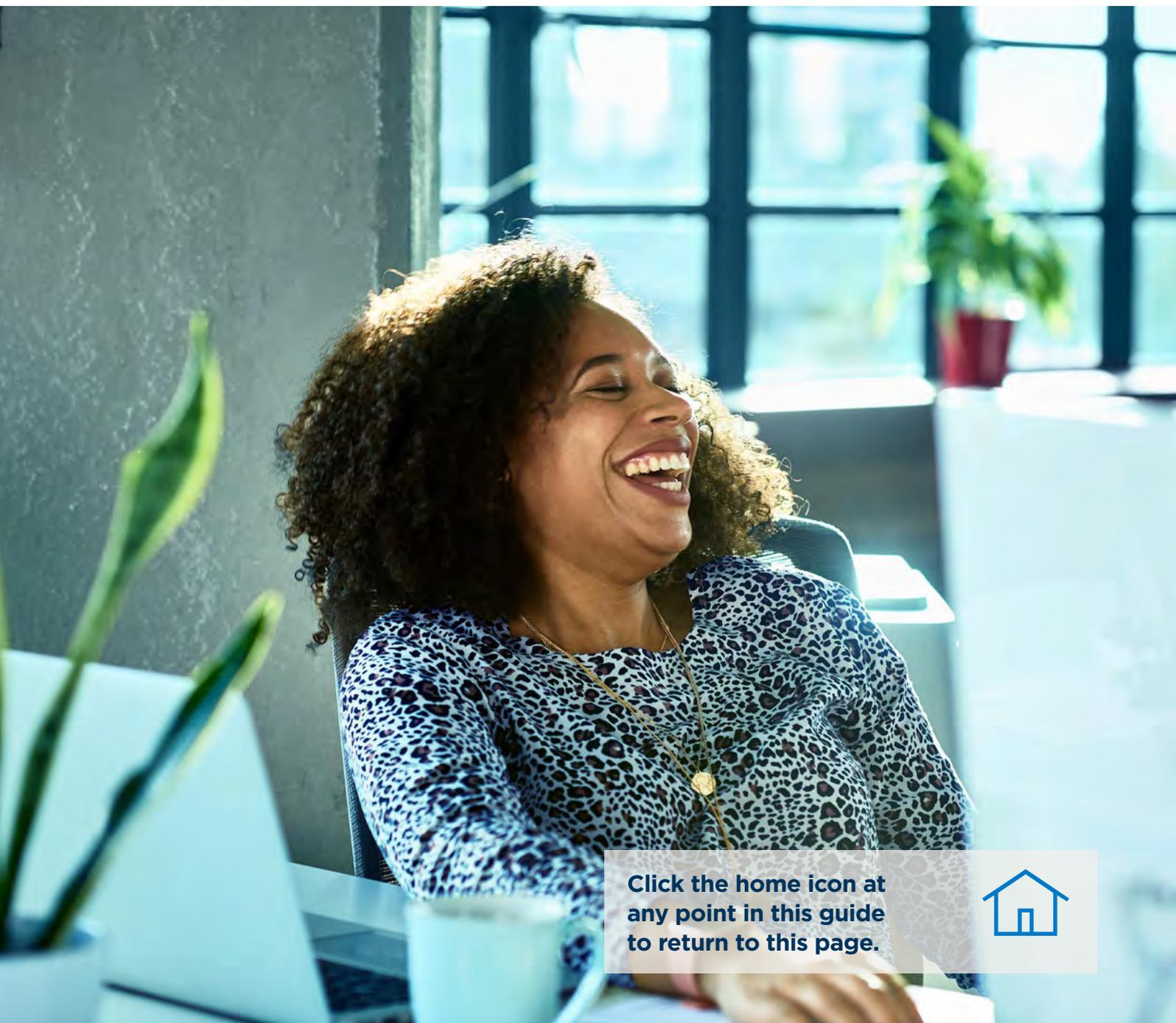
Creating a period friendly workplace: a guide for managers

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Workplace
Health and Wellbeing **Academy**

Introduction

In this guide we'll explain what periods are, the importance of creating a period friendly workplace and how you can support your team.



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Know the facts
on periods

Periods and related
conditions

Period support
at work



How can period health affect your employees?

Did you know that around 1 in 8 people have to take time off work because of symptoms related to their periods? For some, this is every month. On average, for each person between 15 and 45 years old, period-related absenteeism works out at about 1.3 days a year.¹

A reluctance to talk about periods can lead to colleagues coming to work when they feel unwell, instead of calling in sick. Not surprisingly, they then may underperform. A recent research study estimated that, on average, this 'presenteeism' costs another nine days a year in lost productivity.³

Here, we provide guidance to help you support any team members with symptoms related to their periods. By encouraging open conversations, managers can help to create a better working environment for them. And, you can support those having problems in getting the help they need.

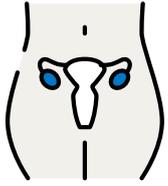


Understanding periods

It's a good idea to know the facts before you start any conversations. It will help you understand what some people are going through if you know:

- how hormones control periods and the menstrual cycle
- the range of symptoms linked to periods
- the impact menstrual symptoms can have on your employees

Understanding how others may be affected will help to make you more approachable to colleagues. It may also help you to be more aware when someone is struggling.



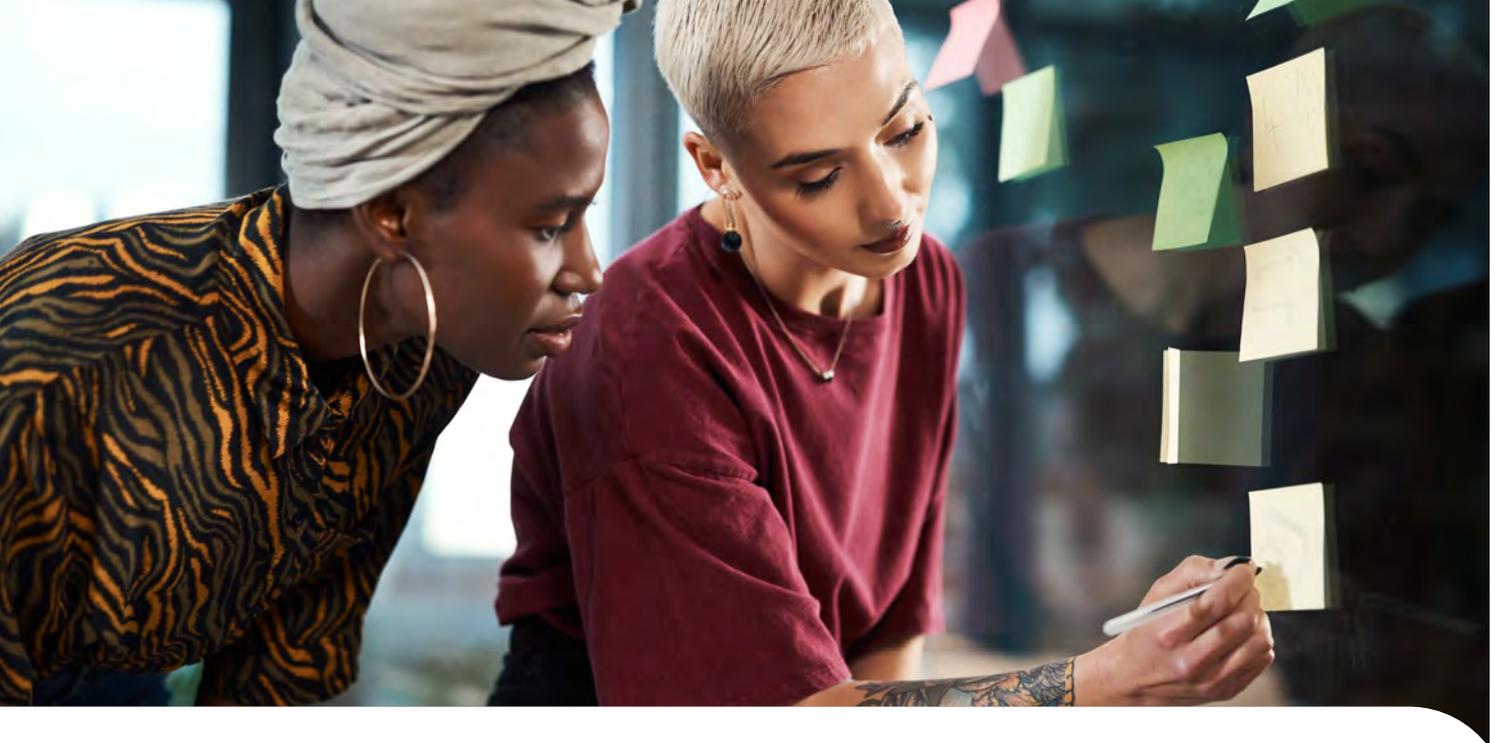
What is a period?

A period is made up of blood and the lining of the womb. This is shed through the vagina for between two and seven days in each menstrual cycle. But, it can go on for longer in some people.

In those who are fertile, the ovaries release an egg each month. If the egg isn't fertilised, it's then passed out of the body with the womb lining. This is called a period. On average, women have a period every 28 days. But this can range from between 21 to 45 days, depending on the person.

The menstrual cycle is controlled by hormones. At the end of a period, oestrogen levels start to rise. This triggers the production of another egg. The oestrogen level peaks and then drops. This causes the egg to be released into the tube that connects the ovary to the womb (ovulation).

Levels of another hormone called progesterone then start to rise. This causes the womb lining to thicken, in case there is a fertilised egg that needs to implant. If there's no pregnancy, the progesterone level starts to drop and the person has their next period.



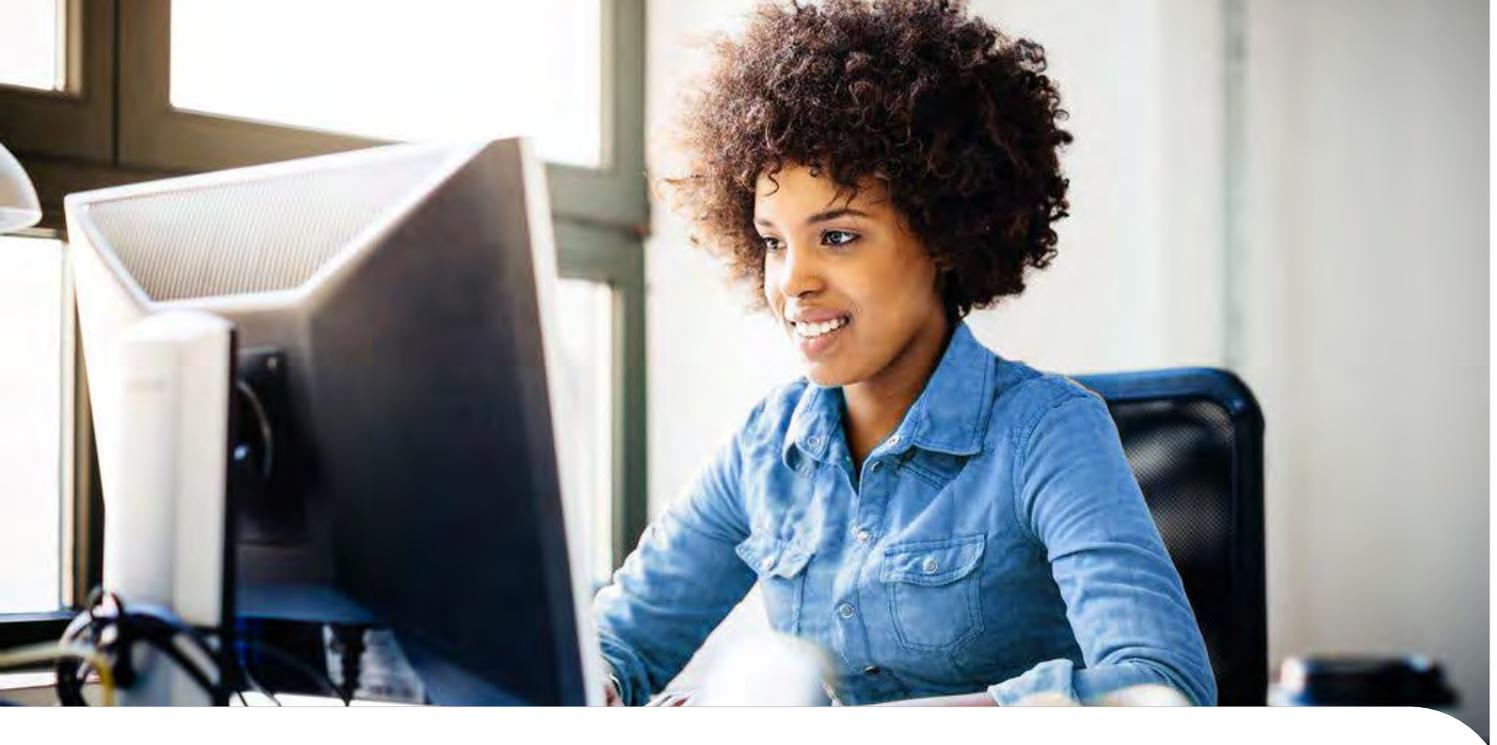
What are the symptoms of periods?

Many people have pain during their periods. Symptoms can include muscle cramps in your back or lower belly. Pain is more common in young women and generally gets better with age.

Some people can feel quite unwell during their periods, and have heavy bleeding. Doctors call heavy periods 'menorrhagia' (pronounced men-or-age-ee-ah). Blood flow is heavier and periods also go on for longer (more than seven days).

Heavy periods are more common with age. But they can also be caused by other medical conditions, such as fibroids (non cancerous growths in the womb), thyroid disease or endometriosis (a painful condition where tissue normally found lining the womb grows in other places). These conditions can cause more health problems if they are not diagnosed and treated.

The blood loss from heavy periods can also lead to anaemia in 6 out of 10 people. Anaemia causes symptoms such as tiredness and headaches. In fact, a survey of those with heavy periods found that common symptoms included feeling sick, anxious, depressed and being anaemic.



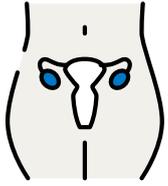
More facts about symptoms linked to periods

You may have period related symptoms:

- before your period
- during your periods

Symptoms can be both physical and emotional. Doctors often suggest keeping a symptom diary for a couple of months. Recording daily how you feel and when symptoms strike can help to show whether problems are related to the menstrual cycle.

It is the changes in female sex hormone levels described above that cause “pre-menstrual” symptoms before a period. The hormone changes can also cause the much more severe condition “premenstrual dysphoric disorder” or PMDD (see section below on PMDD). There is evidence that brain cells are affected by these hormones, causing changes in levels of your body’s chemical signals (neurotransmitters), such as serotonin. Those who have PMDD may have brain cells that are more sensitive to sex hormone levels.



Symptoms of Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD)

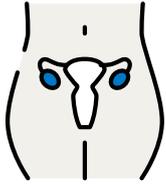
Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) is a more severe form of PMS. We don't know exactly how many people it affects. But, doctors estimate that between 1 in 100 and 1 in 10 women (between 1 percent and 10 percent) are affected.

People with PMDD can have any of the symptoms listed above for PMS. But these are often more severe. For example, to be diagnosed with PMDD, you must have at least one of the following symptoms associated with your menstrual cycle:

- mood changes, such as suddenly feeling tearful or oversensitive
- anger or irritability
- symptoms of depression, such as feeling worthless or hopeless
- anxiety or feeling on edge

If you have PMDD you may also have difficulty concentrating and focussing before your period. You may often feel lethargic, lacking interest in work or usual hobbies and social activities. Symptoms can also include food cravings, or an increased appetite when periods are due.

The effects of PMDD can be life-changing. Some people with PMDD can have such severe depression that they are seven times more likely to attempt suicide than those without PMDD.



Symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS)

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is when you regularly have a range of symptoms in the days before your periods.

Up to 4 out of 10 people have premenstrual syndrome that is severe enough to affect their quality of daily life. The symptoms vary widely – over 150 have been listed as caused by PMS. No one person with PMS will have all of these symptoms. The symptoms will vary from person to person. Physical symptoms can include:

- breast tenderness
- bloating and weight gain
- clumsiness
- headaches

But you may also have:

- mood swings
- anxiety or depression
- tiredness and lack of energy
- feeling out of control
- irritability, aggression and anger
- difficulty sleeping
- food cravings

How can you support your teams?

There are many practical steps you can take to create a period-friendly workplace and support those affected. Periods are something that many people find difficult to talk about. Normalising discussion of period-related issues in your workplace will show you are taking employees problems seriously and that it's OK to talk about them. Here are some ideas:

- Check that policies and working practices don't disadvantage colleagues with period problems.
- Make sure the approach to managing flexible working and sickness absence covers periods and provide guidance for supervisors and managers to help them provide appropriate support.
- If they aren't already working from home are colleagues with period-related problems able to do so to help manage their symptoms?
- Let those affected by periods know they can take a break if they need to. Be mindful that some having heavy bleeding may need to go to the loo to change their sanitary pads or tampons every hour.
- Make sure those affected know who they can speak to if their periods or pre-menstrual symptoms are affecting their work in any way.
- Help your team to feel more comfortable about discussing period related issues during one-to-one chats with their manager. You can do this by fostering an open and accepting atmosphere in the workplace.
- Have sanitary bins in place in all toilets (and emptied daily) and provide free period products, if you can.
- Check how much your team know about periods, and provide educational materials to address any knowledge gaps.

[Bupa's women's health hub](#) has lots of useful information you could use to educate your teams or start a discussion. Topics include painful periods, heavy bleeding and PMS.



How to open up conversations

It can be difficult starting a conversation about something as personal as periods. Try and make sure that:

- meetings are held in a private area where you won't be interrupted
- you reassure staff at the outset that all discussions are confidential
- colleagues feel supported by showing that you take period problems seriously
- you believe them when they explain how they are affected by them
- you acknowledge that some people may feel more comfortable discussing such personal issues with someone else

Try not to be offended if someone doesn't want to talk about their periods. Some colleagues may not feel comfortable discussing their symptoms.

It's important that you don't offer medical advice. But do suggest that colleagues see a GP if symptoms are affecting their daily life. You could also consider referring them to an employee assistance programme (EAP) or counselling service, if these are available where you work.

Six tips to take away

Normalise periods

Dispel any taboos by making sure your whole team knows how issues with PMS and periods can affect people at work. Train managers to be confident about having sensitive conversations with their staff, showing empathy and understanding.

1

Update working practices

Check that your business's approach to health and safety, wellbeing and staff absence recognise periods as a health issue. And make sure that they don't disadvantage those with period related issues.

2

Be open

Raise awareness of period-related issues at work, and encourage conversations, so team members know they can ask for support if they need it.

3

Ask your teams what they need

Team members who are affected will know best what will help. Ask how the workplace and work practices could improve things for them before and during periods.

4

Be practical

Carry out a workplace risk assessment, and make any necessary changes that could help to ease employees' period-related symptoms while they're at work.

5

Be flexible

If a colleague's work performance or attendance dips suddenly, check whether there are any underlying health issues, including period-related problems.

6

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