



Women's Health at Work: A business imperative



Contents

Introduction

Debra Clark - Towergate
Hormone health

Dr Samantha Wild - Bupa
Bladder health

Sophie Catto - Allbright
An employers responsibility



Women's Health at Work: From policy to practice

Introduction

3

Hormone health

Debra Clark, Head of Wellbeing, Towergate

4-6

Bladder health

Dr Samantha Wild, Women's Health Clinical Lead, Bupa UK

7-8

An employers' responsibility

Sophie Catto, AllBright

9-11



Contents

Introduction

Debra Clark - Towergate
Hormone health

Dr Samantha Wild - Bupa
Bladder health

Sophie Catto - Allbright
An employers responsibility



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Dr Petra Simic is Medical Director for Bupa Health Clinics, overseeing safety and service quality across their UK locations. Bupa Health Clinics offer private GP, health screening, mental health, physio, MSK medicine, dermatology, nursing, and health coaching both in-person and virtually. Petra has also been working as a GP for 20 years, both in Bupa and in the NHS. Before joining Bupa in 2016 she was a NHS GP partner in Hertfordshire. She is dedicated to high-quality primary care, supporting strong clinician teams, and delivering innovative, customer-focused healthcare.



Women's health at work: from policy to practice

Women's health is becoming a prominent talking point and priority for many businesses.

We see this from the numerous initiatives aimed at improving workplace wellness and support. For instance, lots of companies now offer enhanced maternity and parental leave, training sessions to increase knowledge, and flexible working arrangements to accommodate women's health needs.

However recent statistics show that 57% of women feel that women's health is still treated as a taboo topic and 32% feel uncomfortable when talking about women's health¹, whether this is discussing their periods or menopause symptoms.

These statistics highlight that, despite the development of workplace programmes to support women's health, much work remains to be done.

The main reasons for lack of engagement we are seeing within the industry is often due to the delivery and implementation of initiatives. Failure to consider the unique needs and experiences of female employees often leads to a lack of uptake and, therefore, results.

Another common pitfall is the lack of genuine engagement from top management, which can render these initiatives ineffective. Without leadership buy-in, programmes may

lack the necessary resources and visibility, ultimately failing to make a meaningful impact. Furthermore, a one-size-fits-all approach can be detrimental. Women's health needs are diverse and dynamic, requiring tailored strategies that consider the different life stages and unique challenges faced by women in the workplace.

At Bupa, part of our mission is to make sure women's health is not addressed as a tick-box exercise, but genuinely improves wellbeing, working environments, and company performance.

We recognise that promoting women's health in the workplace is not just a matter of implementing policies, but fostering an environment where open conversations about health can thrive. By breaking the silence and encouraging conversations, we aim to empower our employees to speak up about their health concerns without fear of judgment or stigma.

Education is a cornerstone of our approach. We provide comprehensive training sessions designed to increase awareness and understanding of women's health issues. These sessions, alongside our Women's Health Hub – a dedicated resource designed to equip our workforce with the tools and information they need – help to manage their health effectively.

¹Bupa Data - wellbeing index.



Debra Clark

Head of Wellbeing, Towergate

With over 30 years in the employee benefits industry, Debra is a mental health first aider, a menopause lifestyle coach and co-chair of their menopause and menstruation colleague community. A passionate advocate for workplace wellbeing, she actively contributes to UK Health & Wellbeing forums and is regularly recognised in industry publications. Debra firmly believes that people are a company's greatest asset, and their wellbeing is key to success.



Hormone health

What is hormonal health and why is it important for us to understand?

Hormonal health refers to the balance and function of hormones – chemical messengers that regulate essential bodily processes such as metabolism, mood, reproduction, and sleep. For women and people assigned female at birth, hormonal health plays a pivotal role across life stages: from puberty and menstruation to fertility, pregnancy, perimenopause, and menopause.

Understanding hormonal health is crucial because it affects nearly everyone. Around 50% of the population will experience hormonal changes directly, and the other 50% will be indirectly impacted, as partners, colleagues, family members, or managers. It affects all working ages, with major hormonal transitions like fertility treatments, pregnancy, and menopause, occurring during a person's working life, with a wide range of symptoms.

Why is it important for businesses?

From a business perspective, supporting hormonal health is not just a wellbeing initiative, it's a strategic imperative.

Around 1 in 10 women leave work due to menopause symptoms, and many more consider it.¹

But crucially, legal obligations are also increasing. In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 and the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 already provide protections, but from 2027, companies with over 250 employees will be required to submit a menopause action plan under the Employment Rights Bill 2024.¹

With 64% of women reporting negative workplace impact due to menopause symptoms, and over half missing work, there is an incentive for businesses to make a change.⁵ Especially knowing that companies with over 33% female leadership enjoy profit margins up to 10 times higher than those without, and replacing an employee costs an average of £30,000. This all makes retention through health support a smart financial move.⁴

How can hormonal health affect women in the workplace?

Hormonal health affects individuals differently. For example, symptoms of menopause, which 75% of women feel moderately to severely, can include hot flushes, sleep disturbances, anxiety, brain fog, and fatigue, many of which can significantly affect work performance.¹

In menstrual health, endometriosis affects around 1 in 10 women, Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) affects 1 in 10, and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD)



affects 1 in 20.^{6,7} Fibroids are more common in black women, who are three times more likely to develop them,

while one in six heterosexual couples experience infertility, often requiring hormone-based treatments.^{3,1}

Symptoms of these can include physical pain, fatigue, hot flushes, weight changes, skin and hair changes, not to mention anxiety, depression, mood swings, loss of confidence, and even cognitive functioning, like brain fog, memory issues, difficulty concentrating or making decisions.

These symptoms can make it difficult to function at work, especially in environments lacking flexibility or understanding. Inclusive policies and tailored support, such as flexible working, access to healthcare, and open conversations, can make a significant difference.

What are some of the misconceptions around hormonal health?

There are many myths, and some fascinating facts which bust them! One of the most common is that **hormonal health only affects women**. On the contrary, transgender men, non-binary individuals, and people undergoing gender transition may also experience hormonal changes. Additionally, hormonal health impacts those around them, like partners, families, and colleagues.

Another common myth is around age – that menopause happens at 51 years old. While 51 is the average age for white women in the UK, menopause can occur earlier or later. Black and Asian women often experience menopause earlier.¹ Perimenopause (the transition phase) can begin up to 10 years before menopause, meaning symptoms may start in the early 40s or even late 30s. Equally, around 1 in 100 women experience premature menopause before age 40.¹ The transition (perimenopause) and post-menopause phases can last years and bring ongoing symptoms.

Finally, there is a myth that men go through menopause too. Men do not experience menopause, but some may go through andropause, a gradual decline in testosterone levels. This can cause symptoms like low

mood, fatigue, and reduced libido, but it is not equivalent to menopause in terms of hormonal shifts or impact.

What are some of the best examples of how companies are addressing and supporting women's health?

Supporting women's hormonal health in the workplace begins with culture. A psychologically safe environment, where employees feel comfortable discussing health challenges without fear of stigma or judgment, is foundational. Campaigns like Just a Period by Wellbeing of Women, aim to shift the narrative, encouraging employers to take menstrual health seriously and respond with empathy and practical support. Companies like Henpicked offer a Menopause Friendly Accreditation, which requires businesses to demonstrate real impact through education, awareness, and support initiatives. Wellbeing of Women's Menopause Workplace Pledge allows employers to publicly commit to supporting employees through menopause, signalling intent and accountability.⁴

Another important initiative is training and awareness. Leading companies are investing in menopause champions, coaches and trained internal advocates who support colleagues and managers, while equipping leaders with the skills to handle sensitive conversations and make reasonable adjustments.

Practical adjustments to the workplace can make a big difference, from free period products in all toilets, with appropriate disposal bins, emergency supplies like spare underwear, wipes, and discreet clothing items (e.g., black cardigans), and quiet rooms or flexible working arrangements for those experiencing symptoms like fatigue, migraines, or anxiety.

Forward-thinking companies are also integrating hormonal health into their employee benefits, with hormonal testing kits,



Virtual GP access, specific menopause and period plans, and mental health support. Employee community groups can provide safe spaces for peer support and shared experiences.

There are now a lot more options available to businesses to enhance anything they do internally and so using a specialist intermediary to help them navigate this, ideally with a wellbeing specialist like we have at Towergate Employee Benefits, could be invaluable.

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Dr Samantha Wild

Women's Health Clinical Lead, Bupa

Sam is an experienced General Practitioner with over 20 years in clinical practice, and is the Clinical Lead for Women's Health for Bupa Clinics. Throughout her career, she has remained committed to delivering compassionate, evidence-based care, and to support other clinicians to do the same. A passionate advocate for women's health, Sam has focused on breaking down stigma around female health issues and empowering women to take control of their wellbeing



Bladder health: why it matters for women and workplaces

Bladder health doesn't receive much attention in the mainstream. Why is that?

Bladder health remains a hidden issue in mainstream conversations due to stigma, embarrassment, and misconceptions that bladder problems are just a normal part of aging or motherhood. This silence leads many to delay seeking help, causing unnecessary discomfort and worsening symptoms. Yet, bladder health is vital to overall wellbeing as it impacts daily life, mental health, and work productivity.

Why should we pay more attention?

Firstly because bladder problems are common. Around one in three women in the UK will experience urinary incontinence at some point in their lives (NHS England). Conditions such as urinary incontinence, urinary tract infections (UTIs), and overactive bladder affect millions but remain underreported and undertreated.

These problems can impact people in many ways. Simply on a day-to-day basis, up to 70% of women report bladder leakage during or after pregnancy (Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists), which can disrupt sleep, social activities, and confidence.

These types of symptoms can also interfere with concentration, attendance and performance at work. Nearly 1 in 5 women report bladder issues negatively impact their work performance (British Journal of Nursing).

Early intervention matters, because many bladder problems are manageable or treatable, especially when addressed early. But, since it isn't widely spoken about, such early intervention is often missed.

What are the common symptoms and risk factors?

Symptoms can vary in their severity. They can include frequent urination (ie more than 6-8 times daily) or sudden, strong urges to urinate, all the way through to involuntary urine leakage (incontinence), pain or burning during urination, blood in urine, difficulty fully emptying the bladder and pelvic pain or pressure

Risks can arise through sexual activity, hormonal changes (particularly menopause), pregnancy and childbirth, chronic health conditions such as diabetes, poor hydration or diets high in bladder irritants (like caffeine and alcohol), or those with a family history of bladder issues.



Are there risks specifically to women?

Yes. Women face unique risks largely due to anatomy and hormonal factors. For example, urinary incontinence is nearly three times more prevalent among women than men, with over 60% of UK women experiencing at least one symptom of poor pelvic floor health (RCOG).

UTIs affect women disproportionately, being 8 times more likely than men to suffer, and with 50–60% experiencing at least one UTI in their lifetime (NICE).

Hormonal shifts during menopause can thin the lining of the bladder and urethra, increasing vulnerability to infections and incontinence, while pregnancy and childbirth can weaken pelvic floor muscles, increasing bladder control issues.

Despite how common these conditions are, nearly half (49%) of women haven't spoken to anyone in the NHS about their pelvic floor health (RCOG), and less than 40% of women seek help for bladder-related symptoms (Bladder and Bowel UK).

What is the impact on businesses, and challenges in the workplace?

When considering the symptoms, it's clear how bladder issues will not only impact the individuals suffering from them, but they work they're tasked to perform.

Frequent bathroom breaks, urgency, and leakage can cause distraction and absenteeism. Incontinence is linked to an estimated £233 million in lost productivity annually in the UK (adapted from Continence Foundation of Australia). While employees may attend work, they may experience presenteeism, performing below capacity due to discomfort or anxiety,

Without support, employees may feel the need to leave work early or retire prematurely, and due to the stigma, employees often feel unable to discuss symptoms, leaving needs unaddressed and stress increased.

How can businesses support employees and raise awareness?

Businesses can make a difference by promoting openness – normalising conversations around bladder and pelvic health within broader wellbeing programs. They may provide facilities and ensure accessible, clean, and private restrooms, while offering flexibility to allow employees to take breaks as needed without penalty.

Educating will also help to support those struggling, eg by sharing information on bladder health, symptoms, and treatment options through workshops, newsletters, or intranet resources. Employers may include bladder health in HR policies and offer reasonable adjustments. And provide occupational health screenings, access to GP services, and pathways to specialist care.

By bringing bladder health into the workplace conversation, businesses foster a supportive environment that improves employee wellbeing and engagement - especially benefiting women during critical life stages, such as pregnancy and menopause.



Sophie Catto

“AllBright”

With over 18 years’ experience in media, publishing and partnerships, Sophie is Joint Managing Director of AllBright everywoman. She leads the organisation’s mission to support and empower women at every stage of their careers, driving growth through community, learning, events and experiences. A passionate advocate for equity and workplace wellbeing, she believes that enabling women to thrive is key to building stronger businesses and a more inclusive economy.



Women’s Health: An employer’s responsibility

What responsibility do employers have when it comes to supporting women’s health?

Employers have a legal, moral, and strategic responsibility to support women’s health in the workplace. It’s no longer just a matter of good intention – it’s increasingly a matter of compliance.

As of April 2024, new UK legislation gives women and their partners the right to leave work following pregnancy loss before 24 weeks. It’s a long-overdue step that acknowledges the emotional and physical toll of miscarriage. Proposed menopause legislation is also gaining momentum, with recommendations that menopause be treated as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act. This change would compel employers to offer reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

The changes reflect what we have always championed: that women’s health is central to their economic empowerment. From chronic conditions like endometriosis or PMDD to perimenopause and fertility treatment, millions of women are navigating health experiences that can deeply affect their careers. Without the right support, they’re often forced to scale back, suffer in silence, or opt out entirely.

According to the International Menopause Society, 68% of job seekers now actively look for information on a company’s menopause policy.

It’s clear that this is not just a ‘women’s issue’, but a recruitment, retention and reputational issue. If companies don’t offer clear support, women will go elsewhere.

That’s why flexibility, paid leave, accessible workplace facilities, and inclusive health benefits are no longer optional. They are essential infrastructure for a modern, equitable workplace.

In our global AllBright community, we’ve seen the impact of lived experience driving change. One of our members, Natalia Kasnakidis, founder of the Limitless Collective, is leading powerful conversations around chronic illness and invisible disability at work. Her advocacy shows what’s possible when women are heard. But the burden of change shouldn’t fall on individuals alone.

Employers must meet women halfway, not just with policy, but with culture. Because supporting women’s health isn’t just about doing the right thing, it’s about building a workplace that works for everyone.



How can businesses create environments where women feel safe discussing health issues like menopause, fertility, or endometriosis?

Businesses can't afford to wait until women are at breaking point before they act. The workplace must become a space where women feel psychologically safe to speak openly about their health, whether it's menopause, fertility challenges, pregnancy loss, or chronic conditions like endometriosis.

We advocate for a dual approach, combining strong policy with cultural transformation. That means not just writing the framework, but creating an inclusive, shame-free environment where women feel able to share their experiences without fear of judgement or career penalty.

The data makes it clear: in 2024, 76% of women said their employer had no accommodations for menopause.¹ And it's not just menopause either. 43% of Gen Y employees say they would consider leaving or changing jobs if they didn't feel their fertility wellbeing was supported.² Women's health is central to retention, engagement, and future-proofing your workforce.

The right policies, such as flexible working, menopause and fertility leave, breakout spaces, and access to health resources make a difference, but culture is what makes those policies meaningful.

Initiatives like Menopause Cafés, employee resource groups and training for managers, including dedicated male allyship sessions, help foster genuine psychological safety. Appointing Menopause or Fertility Champions and creating peer-led safe spaces signal that women's health is valued, supported, and normalised.

As Deborah Garlick of Henpicked puts it, people vote with their feet. If your business isn't health-friendly, especially for women, talent will go elsewhere. Businesses that

break the silence and lead with empathy will be the ones attracting, retaining, and elevating the next generation of leaders.

What kind of workplace policies or cultures do you feel truly move the needle?

The policies that truly make a difference are the ones that treat women's health as a core part of workplace inclusion and productivity.

One of the most impactful shifts is towards flexible and hybrid working. For women managing chronic health conditions like endometriosis, PCOS, or autoimmune illnesses, or those going through fertility treatment, flexibility can be the difference between staying in work and being forced to step back. It allows them to work around energy levels, side effects and emotionally draining appointments without sacrificing performance or ambition.

We also need to see flexibility for medical appointments and treatments. Research shows that 70%³ of employees currently use their sick leave to cover fertility or health-related appointments, often at the expense of both their mental health and physical wellbeing. Many even hide treatments from their employers for fear of stigma, a clear sign that the culture still isn't safe for transparency.

That's why we believe that things like mental health support, wellbeing coaching, access to external specialists, and clear signposting to support inside and outside the workplace should be the baseline.

Just as important is how these policies are communicated and lived. An inclusive culture means women feel they can talk about what they're going through without shame. That takes training for managers, peer-led support networks, and everyday language that normalises these conversations.

Our charity has always championed the need for empathy embedded in leadership. The future of work isn't just about policy; it's about creating environments where women don't have to choose between their health and their careers.



Are there any limitations on the employer's responsibility when supporting women's health in the workplace?

Yes, there are real limits to what employers can take on. They aren't healthcare providers, mental health clinicians, or policymakers and they can't be expected to replace the role of a functioning health system or undo deeply rooted societal stigma on their own.

But that doesn't mean they're off the hook.

Employers are the gatekeepers of workplace culture. They decide whether a woman feels safe disclosing a health issue, whether she's trusted to work flexibly, and whether her experience is met with empathy or silence.

The daily experience of either inclusion or invisibility is entirely within an employer's control. The line, in many ways, is about doing what you can, consistently and meaningfully.

Beyond the office, we know there's a wider cultural shift that must happen, from closing the gender pay gap, demanding better healthcare access, and normalising conversations about women's bodies without shame.

Businesses can't do all of that alone, but they can lead where it matters. And the steps employers take today - from inclusive policy to empathetic culture - will shape a future where women won't have to choose between their health and their careers. That's the opportunity. And that's the responsibility.

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