

Contents

What is the Menopause?.....	2
When does the menopause occur?	2
What happens during the menopause?	2
Perimenopausal Stage.....	3
Menopause symptoms in other circumstances	4
Post Menopause	4
Why is the menopause a workplace issue?	4
Supporting an employee through the menopause.	4
Menopause and the Law	7
Seeking Support and Self Help	9
References.....	9
Appendix 1: Further Information and Advice.....	10

What is the Menopause?

The menopause is normally a natural biological transition point in life – part of the normal ageing process experienced by all women, though not everyone experiences it in the same way.

The term menopause is used to describe the transition years when ovaries spontaneously fail to produce the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. Periods become less frequent and then stop altogether. The menopause is said to have occurred when periods have stopped for 12 consecutive months.

It is important to remember that while all women experience the menopause, they are not the only ones affected. Managers should be mindful that trans and non-binary staff may experience the menopause too (with little support available) and should be treated with dignity and respect, and men may require support while their wife or partner is menopausal. Everyone has different experiences and you should not make assumptions but listen to your staff and support their individual needs sensitively.

Sometimes in this guidance, we refer to women – this is because the majority of people experiencing the menopause are women and sometimes it gets clumsy if we try to list everyone affected every time but it is important to be mindful that other staff members may be affected.

When does the menopause occur?

In the UK, natural menopause occurs between 45 and 55 years of age, with the average age being 51.

However, a significant number of women experience the menopause before the age of 40 (some even in their teens or twenties). This is known as premature menopause or primary ovarian insufficiency and estimates suggest that around 1 in every 100 women in the UK will experience this. Premature menopause may be as a result of medical or surgical intervention, or it can just happen on its own with no clear cause.

Whilst menopause is generally a natural process involving gradual change, it can be sudden and acute following medical or surgical intervention for example chemotherapy, hysterectomy.

What happens during the menopause?

The menopause brings physical changes to the body. For many people experiencing the menopause, it can result in physical, psychological and emotional changes to which it can be difficult to adjust.

The particular changes involved can affect different women in different ways.

- Not everyone has symptoms – some experience few or no problems around this time.
- 80% of women in the UK report noticeable changes – though the type, amount and severity of those symptoms can vary, ranging from mild to severe.
- 45% of women find their symptoms difficult to deal with.
- Approx. 25% of women experience very debilitating symptoms.

In addition, the menopause typically occurs at a challenging time in many women's lives -they may be managing chronic health conditions, whilst bearing the greater share of caring and domestic

responsibilities as well as being in employment. This can impact the emotional wellbeing and increase stress levels. Without appropriate support, women can be left feeling isolated and vulnerable which can affect their work.

Perimenopausal Stage

The perimenopausal stage describes the period of hormonal change leading up to the menopause. It can last for up to five years (though it may be longer for some women, whilst just lasting a few months for others).

During the perimenopause, the levels of hormones produced by the ovaries fluctuate leading to menstrual irregularities in the time between periods, length of period and flow, until they stop altogether. Sometimes they can stop suddenly.

Changes in hormone levels (particularly oestrogen) can lead to symptoms that can have an adverse impact on personal and work life. Whilst experiences of the menopause shall vary, most may experience some of the following:

- **Hot flushes** – hot flushes experienced by most people are described as a sudden feeling of heat, starting in the face, neck or chest, before radiating throughout the body. Most flushes last only a few minutes but during this time there can be sweating with the face, neck and chest becoming red and patchy, with an increased heart rate. For some women, these can be occasional, but others may have many daily -and though generally harmless, these can be uncomfortable, disruptive and embarrassing.
- **Night sweats** – night sweats are when you sweat so much that your night clothes and bedding are soaking wet, even though where you are sleeping is cold/cold.
- **Sleep disturbances/difficulty sleeping** - sometimes related to hot flushes and/or night sweats, though it may also be a result of the anxiety felt during the menopause. This may lead to fatigue, irritability, loss of concentration and/or forgetfulness.
- **Mood disturbance** – including low mood and increased susceptibility to anxiety, which can lead to increased tiredness, tearfulness and an inability to concentrate.
- **Problems with memory** – and/or concentration
- **Vaginal symptoms** – such as dryness, itching, pain and discomfort during sexual intercourse.
- **Heavy periods and clots** – some periods may last longer. Periods can be irregular and more difficult to prepare for.
- **Urinary problems** – including recurrent urinary tract infections such as cystitis.
- **Reduced sexual desire** - which may be as a result of falling hormone levels.
- **Palpitations** – heartbeats that suddenly become more noticeable.
- **Migraines and headaches**
- **Joint stiffness, increased general aches and pains**
- **Reduced muscle mass**
- **Skin irritation**

These symptoms (which can vary in degree) may be experienced even if menstruation continues so women who are still having regular periods may not realise that they are experiencing the perimenopause and not understand the cause of their symptoms.

Menopause symptoms in other circumstances

There are other circumstances in which symptoms may be experienced:

- Whilst menopause is usually a process involving gradual change, it can on occasions be sudden and acute following surgery, serious illness or medication. Women who experience sudden menopause tend to experience more severe symptoms and may require treatment/support to cope.
- Younger women undergoing treatments for conditions such as endometriosis and infertility may experience menopausal symptoms whilst receiving treatment.
- Surgical and medical treatment as part of gender transition can result in menopausal symptoms.

Post Menopause

Symptoms continue on average for up to five years from the last period and can continue for more than ten years.

There is potentially an increased risk of certain conditions including heart disease and osteoporosis during post menopause because of lower levels of certain hormones. These risks are higher for those who have had an early or premature menopause.

Why is the menopause a workplace issue?

In some instances, the menopause can be uneventful, but for others it can impact non their working lives, with it becoming increasingly difficult to function effectively at work. This can leave women feeling less confident, more susceptible to fatigue and stress at work. It has also been recognised that certain aspects of work, working conditions and environment may exacerbate menopausal symptoms.

Symptoms may impact a women's performance at work, leading potentially to capability or disciplinary proceedings. Women may be afraid to approach their workplace for help and support and therefore suffer in silence, losing confidence and feelings of isolation. It is therefore important that employers understand, address and manage these issues in order to protect the health and wellbeing of their workforce. Without effective support, employers risk losing key and valuable talent, expertise and experience.

Many women do not disclose menopause symptoms at work and may take time off because of their symptoms but do not disclose the reason as being related to the menopause or associated symptoms. There are many reasons that employees may not disclose the reason, but may be associated with the employee feels:

- It is a personal/private matter
- They may feel embarrassed disclosing and talking about their symptoms.
- Their symptoms may not be taken seriously
- If they disclose information, it may not remain confidential in the workplace.
- Worries that their job security/opportunity for promotion may be limited.

Supporting an employee through the menopause.

Menopause is very personal and can affect women in different ways. This means that different levels of support and assistance may be required at what can be a very difficult time. Attitudes can vary from empathy and understanding to insensitive, 'jokey' and lack of sympathy.

Support from line managers

As a manager, listening and where possible respond sympathetically to any request of work adjustments is vital.

People who experience the menopause whether direct or indirectly, may require appropriate support from their line manager. As with any long-standing health related conditions, this support can make a major difference to how they deal with the menopause, enabling them to continue working well and productively.

Line managers can only provide support if they are aware that team members are experiencing difficulties; however, can be difficult for people to disclose the problem for various reasons, and can be especially difficult for trans or non-binary team members who are not 'out' to their colleagues or line manager. It is therefore important as a line manager that you are aware of the symptoms associated with the menopause and understand the issues affecting people experiencing the menopause. This will help in fostering an environment where we are more comfortable talking about the menopause, symptoms, and measures that could help minimise these.

Line managers should be sensitive to any feelings of discomfort, listen to concerns and complaints, and consider actions that can be considered to assist with reducing or minimising the impact on symptoms that may affect the team members performance.

It is important to remember:

- To maintain confidentiality in handling health information.
- Any specific needs identified (including reasonable adjustments that are agreed) should be recorded and reviewed regularly.
- Be aware of the potential impact of menopause on performance. If someone's performance suddenly changes, it is worth considering whether the menopause may be a cause.
- Case law has shown the need to take medical information into account in capability situations where ill health has been raised by the employee seeking advice from the GP and/or occupational health.
- Staff should not experience any detriment because they may require time off during this time. Absences should be managed in line with attendance policies.

Risk Assessments

A risk assessment should be undertaken in order to consider the specific needs of employees going through the menopause and ensure that the working environment will not exacerbate their symptoms. The risk assessment shall assist in identifying any potential reasonable adjustments which may be required. Particular issues to consider include temperature, ventilation and materials used in

uniforms that are provided. Welfare matters (including access to clean working toilets and access to cold water) should also be considered. Refer to the risk assessment checklist.

Adjustments

It has been recognised that certain aspects of work and the working environment can aggravate menopausal symptoms. It is therefore important to consider whether reasonable adjustments can be applied to assist women experiencing those symptoms by removing barriers. It is recognised that every workplace is different (for example in some workplaces it is not possible to open windows). Reasonable

Guidance: The Menopause

adjustments should be identified through discussion with the employee concerned, and where appropriate additional advice from occupational health.

The following are adjustments which could be considered to support an employee with various menopause symptoms but most important of all is the need to listen to the employee.

Other adjustments

These may include, but not limited to:

- Flexibility to attend appointments in line with the company attendance policy.
- Flexibility to take breaks when required rather than at pre-determined times, whilst undergoing the menopause, employees may experience feeling unwell, they may require time to take prescribed medication in a private space.
- Consideration of a phased return to work programme, in particular for those women suffering with particularly severe symptoms and impairment.
- Provision of private space for temporary rest times, to talk with a colleague or telephone for professional support.
- Consideration of role – stressful environments, high work demands, and long hours can aggravate menopausal symptoms.

Whilst it is important to consider whether reasonable adjustments can be made to help employees experiencing menopausal symptoms, many use self-help management or seek medical support to self-manage their symptoms.

Hot flushes and daytime sweats

Suggested adjustments may include:

- Facilitating a comfortable working environment for those affected – temperature and ventilation-controlled areas (or the provision of a desk fan that can be controlled by the employee).
- Sitting near a door or window
- Providing access to cold water
- Ensuring ease of access to clean toilet facilities and shower/washing facilities.
- Work adjustments as hot flushes can be difficult to cope with when undertaking high visibility work for example formal presentations and meetings.

Hot Flushes, night sweats and sleep disturbance

These symptoms may result in both the employee and partner experiencing being tired at work, reasonable adjustments may include:

- Flexible working patterns, for example later start time

Urogenital problems

This may include an increased frequency and urgency to pass urine, with a need to frequent toilet facilities and to increase fluid intake. Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Ease of access to toilet facilities
- Access to suitable wash/shower facilities
- Frequent breaks
- Ease of access to drinking water.

Heavy or irregular periods

Occasionally women may suffer from heavier or unpredictable periods during the perimenopausal stage. Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Ease of access to suitable toilet facilities
- Ease of access to suitable washing facilities
- Frequent breaks to go to the toilet
- Provision of storage for sanitary products within or close to the toilet.

Psychological Matters

A lack of confidence, forgetfulness and/or memory loss, difficulty in concentrating, and a change in mood is reported by many women going through the menopause. This can result in some tasks becoming more difficult to perform temporarily and may impact performance. Stress can exacerbate these symptoms.

Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Encourage employee to discuss concerns with line manager/HR/occupational Health
- If an EAP programme is available, ensuring the employee has the relevant contact details

Psychological and Social Impact

Some employees may report a feeling of isolation. Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Promoting physical and mental wellbeing at work
- Access to counselling
- Access to EAP programme

Muscular aches, bone and joint pain

Some women experience these symptoms, which can impact their ability with manual handling tasks or adopting static posture for periods of time. Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Risk assessment of role
- Rotation of tasks
- Temporary adjustments

Menopause and the Law

Whilst there is no specific legislation addressing the impact of the menopause in the workplace, there are regulations of which the employer should be aware.

The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) requires employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all employees. Under the Act, employers are required to conduct risk assessments under the management regulations, and these should include specific risks to menopausal women, considering their specific needs and ensuring that the working environment will not exacerbate their symptoms.

The Equality Act (2010) protects employees from discrimination in the workplace and includes both direct and indirect discrimination and harassment.

The protected characteristics are:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage or civil partnership pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Gender
- Sexual Orientation

Sex Discrimination

Employers could risk facing claims of sex discrimination under the Act if they fail to properly support female employees who are experiencing the menopause. An example could be refusing to take into account menopause symptoms as a mitigating factor when applying a performance management policy, when it could be reasonably assumed that similar symptoms (for example memory problems) arising from other conditions would be taken into account as a mitigating factor for male employees.

The first successful Employment Tribunal concerning the menopause was in 2012 (Merchant vs BT plc). Ms Merchant alleged that she had been discriminated against on the grounds of her gender when her employer failed to deal with her menopause symptoms in the same way that it would have been dealt with other medical conditions. Ms Merchant had been underperforming and had reached the final written warning stage of her capability process. She provided her employers with a letter from her GP stating that she was experiencing symptoms of the menopause which could affect her levels of concentration at times and that she was also suffering stress as she was the carer for two family members.

Whilst the employer's capability process required an investigation as to whether underperformance was due to health factors, the possible impact of menopause was not investigated – rather, the manager concerned relied on his own knowledge of the menopause, together with the symptoms experienced by his wife and a colleague. Ms Merchant had subsequently been dismissed prior to her claim to the Tribunal.

The tribunal concluded that the dismissal was discriminatory and unfair, stating that a man suffering from ill health with comparable symptoms from a medical condition (in this case, affecting concentration) and with performance issues would not have been treated in the same manner. The failure to refer Ms Merchant for an occupational health assessment following receipt of her GP letter, before taking the decision to dismiss, was held to be direct sex discrimination.

Harassment

An example of harassment might be a manager commenting that there is no point promoting a menopausal employee because they are 'hormonal'. Even if not addressed directly at a particular employee, this can cause employees to be upset and worry about their careers, which could be considered harassment.

Disability

Whilst the menopause is not in itself a disability, conditions arising from it may meet the definition of an 'impairment' under the Equality Act. As an example, depression linked to the menopause and which have a substantial and long-term adverse effect on ability to carry out normal day to day activities, mean that the employee concerned would be considered to have a disability under the Act. An employer is required to make reasonable adjustments where a disabled employee would be at a substantial disadvantage compared with a non-disabled colleague.

Seeking Support and Self Help

Employees should not suffer in silence.... Consider:

- Discussing symptoms and seeking support from a trusted manager/HR. If you do not feel that you can speak with your line manager, seek support from another manager, HR, another colleague in your team.
- Consulting a GP on managing the menopause, and to ensure the symptoms are not the result of anything else.
- Speak with occupational health about symptoms in order to obtain advice and support.

Whilst some women go through this natural process without requirement for intervention, others experience more difficult symptoms. These can pose significant challenges to daily living, leading to the need to seek support from a healthcare practitioner or consider self-help alternatives. If you are struggling to cope, seek support from your GP in the first instance.

Healthier Lifestyle

Current health promotion advice highlights the importance of lifestyle choices before, during and after the menopause. Lack of sleep, stress, unhealthy eating and unhealthy lifestyle can increase the symptoms of menopause.

References

NICE Guidelines: Menopause: diagnosis and management www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23

Menopause at work: www.acas.org.uk/menopause

Menopause at the workplace guidance: www.thebms.org.uk

Guidance on the menopause and the workplace, Faculty of Occupational Medicine: www.som.org.uk

Royal College of Nursing: Guidance on Menopause: www.rcn.org.uk

Appendix 1: Further Information and Advice

Further information about the menopause, can be accessed using the following links.

NHS Menopause Guidance – Provides an overview, together with information about menopausal symptoms and treatment options. www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/

Menopause Matters – An independent website that provides up to date information about the menopause, symptoms and treatment options. www.menopausematters.co.uk

British Menopause Society provides education, information and guidance to healthcare professionals specialising in all aspects of reproductive health. www.thebms.org.uk

Unison guidance on the menopause: www.unison.org.uk

Royal College of Nursing: Guidance on Menopause: www.rcn.org.uk

TUC The menopause in the workplace: www.tuc.org.uk/menopause-work