



Newson Health

# Menopause and the workplace

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## Menopause and me in the workplace

The menopause is not an illness or medical condition: it is a completely normal life event for women.

However, the troublesome symptoms that the menopause can bring are all too often under-recognised, undervalued and not taken seriously.

Symptoms such as hot flushes, fatigue, mood changes and brain fog not only affect home life and relationships, but careers too.

Nine out of ten women say their menopausal or perimenopausal symptoms have a negative impact on their work - according to a survey of 1,132 women by The Menopause Doctor website ([menopausedoctor.co.uk](http://menopausedoctor.co.uk)).

Other findings included:

9% had a disciplinary process, as a result of poor performance

51% of respondents reported having time off work due to their symptoms

51% had reduced their working hours

32% considered quitting their job altogether.

This guide contains advice and tips on how to make the menopause more manageable in the workplace, including how employers should be supporting women and ways women can reduce the impact of their symptoms at work. First, let's look at what the menopause actually is, symptoms women may experience, and discover the treatments and lifestyle changes that can make a real difference.

## What is the menopause?

The menopause is when women stop having periods. It occurs when the ovaries stop producing eggs and as a result, levels of hormones called estrogen and progesterone fall.

**There are four key stages:**

**Pre-menopause:** the time in your life before any menopausal symptoms occur:

**Perimenopause:** when a woman experiences menopausal symptoms due to hormone changes, but still has her period

**Menopause:** when a woman has not had a period for 12 consecutive months

**Postmenopause:** the time in a woman's life after she has not had a period for 12 consecutive months

## When and how does the menopause happen?

**Did you know? Women spend on average a third of their life postmenopausal**

The average age of the menopause is 51, and symptoms of the perimenopause often start at around 45 years of age.

If the menopause occurs when a woman is under 45 years, then it is called an 'early' menopause. If it occurs before the age of 40, it is classed as premature ovarian insufficiency (POI).

Certain circumstances can trigger an early menopause or POI. These include surgery involving the ovaries, having radiotherapy to the pelvic area as a treatment for cancer, or certain types of chemotherapy drugs to treat cancer. For more information on early menopause and POI, see *Menopause and Me: A Guide for Younger Women*.

**Half of women report having to take time off work because of their perimenopausal or menopausal symptoms**

## What symptoms can the menopause bring?

About three in four women will experience symptoms during their menopause, which can affect both their home and work lives.

The severity of symptoms varies tremendously between women. Some will only experience them for a few months, others can continue to suffer for years – even decades.

Physical symptoms like hot flushes, a change in her periods, joint pains and headaches can have an impact on a woman's ability to function at work and lead to time off.

But the psychological symptoms like low mood, fatigue and poor concentration can also take their toll, affecting productivity and how mentally engaged they feel at work.

Common symptoms can include:

**Period changes:** This is often the first sign. Women can experience a change in flow and periods will become less frequent before stopping completely.

**Hot flushes:** This is the most common symptom of all, affecting three out of four women. Hot flushes can come on suddenly at any time of day, spreading throughout the face, chest and body. For some women, they may last for moments, for other several minutes. Hot flushes can have associated symptoms such as sweating, dizziness or even heart palpitations.

**Night sweats:** Many women find they wake up drenched in sweat and have to change their pyjamas or bed clothes. This can also be a disruptive symptom for partners too.

**Mood changes:** Some women who suffer from mood changes find they are very disruptive to work and home life. Mood changes are more common if a woman has had premenstrual syndrome in the past.

**Fatigue and poor sleep:** Poor sleep can be related to night sweats, but women may be more tired during the day even if their sleep is not affected.

**Brain fog:** This is a collective term for symptoms such as memory slips, poor concentration, difficulty absorbing information and a feeling the brain is like "cotton wool". Brain fog can not only present a challenge while at work, it can also affect the simplest of tasks like reading a book or listening to the radio.

**Joint pains:** Estrogen is very important in providing lubrication in the joints and preventing inflammation, so low levels of estrogen can leave joints sore and aching.

**Hair and skin changes:** Estrogen is important in building collagen - the protein that protects the structure of the skin. Lower levels of estrogen can lead to reduced elasticity, fine lines and dryness. Some women find their skin becomes itchier, or they develop acne. Changing hormones can also make the hair thinner and less glossy and can cause increased facial hair growth.

**Worsening migraines:** Women who suffer from migraines may find they become more severe and closer together.

**How is the menopause treated?:** There are a range of treatments available to help manage menopause symptoms and, in many cases, vastly improve a woman's quality of life.

The best-known treatment is hormone replacement therapy (HRT), which works by replacing the hormones a woman's body stops making during the menopause.

No woman should wait until symptoms become too unmanageable before seeking help.

In addition, the menopause can also raise the risk of osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease, so speaking to a health professional is really important.

They will be able to talk through available treatments, to make an informed decision based on their individual circumstances.

## How can menopause affect work?

Women over the age of 50 are the fastest growing group in the UK workforce.

As the average age of the menopause is 51, it means that symptoms often occur when women are at the peak of their careers. Yet many women do not recognise their symptoms are related to the menopause, instead putting them down to the stresses of work and home life. While stress and busyness can clearly contribute to a woman's mood, brainpower and energy levels, it is worth remembering it might not be the whole picture.

The prevailing culture of not talking about the menopause in the workplace means many women won't feel comfortable discussing their symptoms with their manager or colleagues, and importantly, won't feel they can ask for help addressing their symptoms.

Research has shown that menopausal women feel less engaged at work, have a lower level of commitment, feel less satisfied and have a greater intention to quit their job altogether the more bothersome their symptoms are.

In addition, studies show that menopausal symptoms can have a significant impact on workplace attendance and performance. Menopausal symptoms can also lead to some women leaving their jobs early, or not putting themselves up for promotion.

Worryingly, menopausal symptoms are commonly misdiagnosed as depression. A survey of 2,920 women by Newson Health about their experiences of menopause care, found 66% of women were wrongly offered anti-depressants.

## What should employers be doing?

Employers have a responsibility to look after the health and wellbeing of all their employees.

Having a proactive approach when it comes to the menopause is not only the responsible thing to do - it also makes good business sense. Creating a culture where women can talk openly about their concerns with their colleagues and managers, improves job satisfaction and reduces absenteeism.

Ideally, your employer will already have a menopause policy in place, as part of a holistic approach to employee health and wellbeing. This should include ways staff can access menopause information and support, carrying out assessments to determine what adjustments may be

needed at work, and awareness training for line managers.

Sadly, this is not as commonplace as it should be. If your employer doesn't yet have a menopause policy, there are a number of useful resources to help identify what sort of support you should be getting:

- The Faculty of Occupational Medicine's 2016 guidance on menopause in the workplace is aimed at women going through menopause and their employers. It offers employers practical guidance on how to improve workplace environments for menopausal women ([tinyurl.com/menopause-in-workplace](http://tinyurl.com/menopause-in-workplace)). The FOM guidelines advocate menopausal awareness training, making

adjustments to the working environments – such as having fans available and relaxing uniform requirements for employees affected by hot flushes. It also calls for flexible working and most importantly, creating opportunities to facilitate discussion about symptoms that are impacting on an employee's ability to work.

- The Chartered Institute of Personnel and

Development published a guide in 2019 for employers and line managers ([www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/menopause](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/menopause)).

- The British Menopause Society produced a guide in 2019 for employers considering writing their own guidance on the menopause ([tinyurl.com/BMS-menopause-workplace](http://tinyurl.com/BMS-menopause-workplace)).

## Are symptoms affecting your career? Five steps to menopause-proof your job

To help you tackle your symptoms and get the right support, the FOM suggests the following:

### **1. Get advice on treatment and lifestyle changes**

Talking to a health professional will help you make an informed decision about the right treatment and lifestyle changes that can help tackle your symptoms. The FOM also recommends relaxation techniques that could help with your symptoms, such as mindfulness.

### **2. Talk about it**

Your menopause is a very personal experience but talking about it could help you secure the support you need. The FOM recommends discussing your practical needs with your line manager, your human resources department or another manager you feel comfortable talking to. You should also consider talking to your colleagues, so they are in the picture about day-to-day considerations.

### **3. Think about flexible working**

Flexible working is a way of working that suits your needs as an employee, such as having flexible start and finish times, or working from home. Explore whether this could help with some of your symptoms, for example, a later start time if you are experiencing sleepless nights ([www.gov.uk/flexible-working](http://www.gov.uk/flexible-working)).

### **4. Avoid triggers at work**

Caffeine and spicy foods can trigger hot flushes, so best to avoid them at work, particularly before a big meeting or presentation.

### **5. Use technology to your advantage**

If memory lapses or poor concentration are an issue at work, use reminders and to-do lists on your phone, keep a note of important dates and make meeting notes to serve as a prompt for when you next need it.



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Dr Louise Newson is a GP and menopause specialist in Stratford-upon-Avon, UK. She has written and developed the website [www.menopausedoctor.co.uk](http://www.menopausedoctor.co.uk) and is the founder of the 'balance' menopause app [www.balance-app.com](http://www.balance-app.com).

The website and app contain evidence-based, non-biased information about the perimenopause and the menopause. She created both platforms to empower women with information about their perimenopause and menopause and to inform them about the treatments available.

Her aim is for women to acquire more knowledge and confidence to approach their own GP to ask for help and advice.

The team at Newson Health are passionate about improving awareness of safe prescribing of HRT to ladies at all stages of the perimenopause and menopause and also offering holistic treatments for the perimenopause and menopause.

Louise is also the director of the not-for-profit company Newson Health Research and Education.

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