

The menopause and work

A guide for UNISON safety reps

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Introduction

Roughly half of UK workers are women, all of whom will experience the menopause. There are currently 3.5 million women workers over the age of 50 in the UK, which is almost half (45%) of the over-50 workforce. (Office of National Statistics, 2010.)

Although it is rarely discussed at work, the menopause is a natural stage of life that millions of women workers are either going through now or will experience in the future.

The menopause is marked by changes in the hormones and the ending of menstruation (when a woman's periods stop for 12 consecutive months). For most women it happens between the ages of 45 and 55, although a minority of women experience it in their 30s or earlier. In the UK the average age for a woman to reach the menopause is 52.

During the period before the menopause (perimenopause) these changes lead to menstrual irregularities. Symptoms associated with the menopause include hot flushes, palpitations, night sweats and sleep disturbance, fatigue, poor concentration, irritability, mood disturbance, skin irritation and dryness. Overall, this period of hormonal change and associated symptoms can last from four to eight years.

The menopause can lead to changes in a women's health and may also lead to emotional changes.

These can affect how a woman does her work and her relationship with her colleagues. Unfortunately there is often very little understanding of the issues and very little support for women who are going through the menopause.

Employers have been slow to recognise that women of menopausal age may need special consideration. For too long it has simply been seen as a private matter. As a result it is very rarely discussed and many managers will have no awareness of the issues involved. This means many women feel that they have to hide their symptoms and will be less likely to ask for the adjustments that may help them.

This must change. The menopause is an occupational health issue, and one that is growing in importance. Women now make up almost half the workforce and there are an estimated three and a half million women over the age of 50 currently in work. That number will rise as the retirement age for women increases over the coming years.

It is important that safety representatives and stewards raise the issue in the workplace and make sure that employers are aware of their responsibilities to ensure that conditions in the workplace do not make menopausal symptoms worse. Women who are experiencing the menopause also need to know that there is someone they can go to and discuss any difficulties they are having.

What happens to women going through the menopause?

The changes associated with the menopause begin before a woman's periods stop. Some women experience almost no symptoms, but around 80% do experience noticeable changes and of these, 45% find their symptoms difficult to deal with. The most common symptoms are hot flushes, night sweats and irritability. Without treatment, most menopausal symptoms gradually stop naturally.

Most women with symptoms have at least two or three years of 'hormonal chaos' as their oestrogen levels decline before the last period, although for some this can go on for five or more years. This is called the perimenopause. During this time menstrual periods become less frequent, the odd period is missed and then they stop altogether. Women are said to be postmenopausal any time after their last period. However, a small minority still have hot flushes in their eighties.

Every woman's experience of the menopause will be different but some of the most common symptoms that women may experience are:

- **Hot flushes**, which can start in the face, neck or chest, before spreading upwards and downwards. At night they are felt as night sweats. Most flushes only last a few minutes and the woman may sweat and the face, neck and chest become red and patchy. The heart rate can also become quicker or stronger.
- **Sleep disturbance**, sometimes caused by night sweats although it can also be caused by the anxiety women feel during the menopause. Sleep loss can cause irritability or lack of concentration at work. The menopause may also be linked to increased anxiety or depression.
- **Urinary problems**, many women have recurrent lower urinary tract infections, such as cystitis. It is common to have an urgent need to pass urine or a need to pass it more often than normal.
- **Heavy periods and clots** are common and some periods may last longer. Most women will

also experience irregular periods which make it harder to prepare for them.

- **Vaginal symptoms** such as vaginal dryness, itching or discomfort are also common. These happen not only during the menopause and shortly after but can also occur in the in the period leading up to the change taking place.

Sometimes it's difficult to tell if symptoms are caused by the menopause or by other factors in midlife. Many women may feel confused or powerless if they don't understand why their body is behaving in the way it is.

Women's experience at work

In 2011 the British Occupational Health Research Foundation (BOHRF) published research by the University of Nottingham exploring the experience of working through the menopause. This showed:

- Many women found they are/were little prepared for the onset of the menopause, and even less equipped to manage its symptoms at work. Over half had not disclosed their symptoms to their manager.
- The majority of the women felt they needed further advice and support.
- Workplaces and working practices are not designed with menopausal women in mind.
- Heavy and painful periods, hot flushes, mood disturbance, fatigue and poor concentration pose significant and embarrassing problems for some women, resulting in lowered confidence.
- Women are often uncomfortable disclosing their difficulties to their managers, particularly if those managers are younger than them or male.
- Where women had taken time off work to deal with their symptoms, only half of them disclosed the real reason for absence to their line managers.
- Some women said they worked extremely hard to overcome their perceived shortcomings due to menopause.
- Others considered working part-time, although they were concerned about the impact on their career if they did so, or had even thought about leaving the labour force altogether.

- Over half of the sample reported they were not able to negotiate flexible working hours or working practices as much as they needed to in order to deal with their symptoms.
- Over half of the women felt that it would be useful to have information or advice regarding the menopause and how to cope with work from their employer.
- Temperature in the workplace was an issue for many women and nearly half of the sample reported not having temperature control in their usual working environment. Some could not open windows, or experienced interpersonal difficulties doing so in shared workspaces.

The research also showed that many women had developed strategies for coping with problematic menopausal symptoms at work, such as obtaining fans or opening windows, adjusting their working hours or routine, active coping strategies (like disclosure, requesting formal adjustments, trying to control emotions, using positive reinterpretations and humour), taking precautionary measures such as wearing layers of clothes, and having a change of clothes at work.

Some women use hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to cope with the more troublesome symptoms at work, although the majority surveyed by BOHRF did not use it. Nearly three quarters of the women who had tried HRT reported that work was one of the main reasons they had decided to try it, and 91% of these said it had helped.

Many women adopted more general strategies such as altering their diet, trying to sleep longer at weekends, doing more exercise, wearing layers of clothing, seeking out more information about the menopause, maintaining a sense of humour, making time for themselves, and making changes to their appearance to counteract an increasingly negative self image.

TUC research

In March 2003 the Trades Union Congress (TUC) surveyed 500 safety representatives on the issue. This survey found that 45% said their managers

didn't recognise problems associated with the menopause. Almost one in three respondents to the TUC survey reported management criticism of menopause-related sick leave, over a third cited embarrassment or difficulties in discussing the menopause with their employers, and one in five spoke of criticism, ridicule and even harassment from their managers when the subject was broached.

Respondents to the TUC survey said that the symptoms of the menopause most likely to be made worse by work were:

- hot flushes (53%)
- headaches (46%)
- tiredness and a lack of energy (45%)
- sweating (39%)
- anxiety attacks (33%)
- aches and pains (30%)
- dry skin and eyes (29%).

The survey showed that it was the working environment that was responsible for making these symptoms worse. Two-thirds of the safety representatives reported that high workplace temperatures were causing problems for menopausal women, and over half blamed poor ventilation. Other complaints were about poor or non-existent rest facilities or toilet facilities, or a lack of access to cold drinking water.

One of the biggest issues highlighted in the TUC report was the relationship between stress and increased symptoms with 49% of respondents mentioning this. Working hours were also cited as a problem for women working through the menopause.

What can employers do?

Women who are experiencing the menopause need support from line management. With any longstanding health-related condition this is crucial and can make a major difference to how a woman will deal with the issues arising from the menopause. Work can affect women working through the menopause in various ways, especially if they cannot make healthy choices at work.

It is also important to remember that every workplace is different. For instance in some workplaces it is not possible to open windows or improve ventilation. Women who have to wear a uniform will also be less able to change the type of clothing they are wearing when they are having flushes or sweating.

UNISON believes that employers have a responsibility to take into account the difficulties that women may experience during the menopause. The Health and Safety at Work Act requires them to ensure the health safety and welfare of their employees, and they are required to do risk assessments under the Management Regulations which should include any specific risks to menopausal women if they are employed. They also have a duty not to discriminate under the 2010 Equalities Act.

As such women should be able to expect support and assistance during what is, for many, a very difficult time.

- Employers should ensure that all line managers have been trained to be aware of how the menopause can affect work and what adjustments may be necessary to support women who are experiencing the menopause.
- Employers can ensure that, as part of a wider occupational health awareness campaign, issues such as the menopause are highlighted so all staff know that the employer has a positive attitude to the issue, and it is not something that women should feel embarrassed about. Guidance on how to deal with the menopause should be freely available in the workplace.
- All women should be given information of how they can get support for any issues that arise as a result of the menopause. Because of the way that society treats the menopause, many women will feel uncomfortable going to their line manager, especially if it is a man, and other options should be available. This may be through human resources, or a welfare officer. Many employers have employer assistance programmes that can act as a go-between.

- Sickness absence procedures should make it clear that they are flexible enough to cater for menopause-related sickness absence. Women should experience no detriment because they may need time off during this time.
- All menopause-related sickness absence should be recorded as an ongoing issue, rather than individual absences. Many employers use the Bradford Factor to evaluate sickness absence, which penalises many short term absences by assigning a negative score to the employee. However allowances are made for few periods of long-term absence.
- Working time arrangements should be flexible enough to ensure that they meet the needs of menopausal women, who may require leaving suddenly. They may also need more breaks during the day.
- Risk assessments should consider the specific needs of menopausal women and ensure that the working environment will not make their symptoms worse. Issues that should be looked at include temperature and ventilation and the materials used in any uniform or corporate clothing provided to women workers. The assessments should also address welfare issues such as toilet facilities and access to cold water.
- Employers need to be aware that workplace stress can worsen menopausal symptoms and in some cases has been shown to bring on an earlier menopause. Stress should be risk assessed alongside concerns like temperature and access to facilities.

What can safety reps do?

Safety representatives and stewards also have a role to play in challenging attitudes to the menopause, ensuring that their employer has procedures in place, and in offering support to women who are experiencing problems. Representatives should raise the issue with their employer using the checklist above and ensure that the workplace meets the needs of menopausal women. Bear in mind that there may be specific issues in your workplace (such as temperature or dress code) that make it even harder for women who are going through the

menopause. It is therefore important that you tailor any response to the actual needs of your members.

Raising women's health issues within the workplace will show that women can come to UNISON when they have difficulties. Some branches have run a women's health day which highlights a range of issues that can affect women in the workplace. You can also put up leaflets on the issue on the UNISON notice-board. Having more women safety representatives or stewards also helps. A poster to help encourage women members to take up the role of a safety rep can be found on the UNISON health and safety web page. Safety representatives also have a role in ensuring that risk assessments take into account any potential health needs of women who are experiencing the menopause.

Further information

The following organisations have produced leaflets or guides on the menopause. Check their website for more details. Leaflets for distribution within the workplace may also be available through your local NHS Trust. Useful sources of information include:

- UNISON health and safety web pages at unison.org.uk/safety
- UNISON female safety reps recruitment leaflet. http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/Health_and_Safety_June_2011.pdf
- *Women's Experience of Working through the Menopause*. December 2010. A report for the British Occupational Health Research Foundation. http://www.bohrf.org.uk/downloads/Womens_Experience_of_Working_through_the_Menopause-Dec_2010.pdf
- *Working through the change: health and safety and the menopause*. March 2003. TUC, based on a TUC survey of safety reps. <http://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace/tuc-6316-f0.cfm>
- *Menopause: A Hazards Campaign Fact Sheet*. 2003. The Hazards Campaign. <http://www.hazards.org/haz82/menopause.pdf>
- NHS menopause guidance. <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/menopause/Pages/Menopausehome.aspx>
- Health Talk Online menopause guidance. http://www.healthtalkonline.org/Later_life/Menopause
- Menopause Matters. menopausematters.co.uk/
- menopause.org.uk



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