
Supporting menopausal women at work

Introduction

Raising women's health issues within UCU is a priority for the union. UCU branches are encouraged to hold a women's health day to highlight issues and to support women in the workplace.

Women going through the menopause may need additional consideration or adjustments. Often the menopause is still not recognised as a workplace issue which results in many women being unable to access the adjustments they need.

What is the menopause?

The *menopause* is a natural part of a woman's life that usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55 and in the UK the average age for a woman to reach the menopause is 51 years. However, it is not uncommon for some women to experience the menopause before the age of 40; this is called *premature menopause*.

The *peri-menopause* is the period of hormonal change leading up to the menopause when women may start to experience symptoms. The peri-menopause can last up to 5 years, although it can be longer and for some women it may just last a few months.

Symptoms

Menopausal women will experience various symptoms that can have a significant impact on them at work. The causes for many of the symptoms will stem from changes in hormonal levels. It is important to note that not all menopausal women will experience these symptoms as no two women are the same. Some of the symptoms of the menopause include:

Hot flushes/flushes
Night sweats
Low moods or anxiety
Memory/concentration issues
Difficulty sleeping
Bleeding and irregular periods
Vaginal issues and reduced sex drive
Bloating
Breast tenderness or swelling
Headaches
Indigestion

Skin irritation, dryness or itching
Muscular aches, bone and joint pains
Urinary problems
Fatigue

Impact in the workplace

For working age women, managing these symptoms in the workplace requires employers to be empathetic whilst offering practical support. Without the right support, menopausal women in the workplace can experience embarrassment and discomfort, especially during periods of extreme hot flushes and sweats, heightened anxiety or having to be absent from work altogether due to the symptoms experienced.

How employers can support menopausal women

The workplace can assist menopausal women by:

- Ensuring that **all** managers have been trained to understand how the menopause can affect work and what adjustments may be necessary to support women, e.g. desktop fans,
- Raising awareness through campaigns, occupational/women's health days, employee assistance schemes, induction programmes and written guidance, i.e. policies and procedures,
- Providing all female employees with information on how they can be supported at work. This should include and take into account:
 - who women can talk to within their workplace (they may, for example, feel uncomfortable talking to a younger, male line manager)
 - cultural/religious make up of women in the workplace,
- Sickness absence procedures being flexible enough to meet the needs of menopause related sickness absence. Women should also experience no detriment if they require time off during this time,

- Conducting risk assessments which should consider the specific needs of menopausal women and ensure the working environment will not make their symptoms worse. Issues that need looking at include (but is not limited to) temperature and ventilation, toilet facilities, access to cold drinking water. Improved welfare facilities could also include a quiet place to rest and easily adjustable temperature and humidity controls,
- Allowing time off to attend medical appointments during working hours,
- Offering flexible working for women experiencing extreme tiredness and other related symptoms,
- Encouraging menopausal women to discuss their feelings as emotions can be heightened during this time.

What UCU branches and reps can do to help?

Union reps have a key role in supporting members and helping to challenge workplace discrimination and harassment of all kinds, including that linked to the menopause. The menopause is both an equality issue and a health and safety issue. Local branches and reps can help in the following ways:

- Carry out a survey of members to find out what the issues are and what support is needed
- Raise the issue at branch meetings, health and safety committee and with employers
- Workplace campaign
- Negotiate a workplace policy
- Consider a workplace support group

Legislation

Health and Safety legislation provides the following protections in regards to menopausal women:

- **Health and Safety at Work Act 1974** requires employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees
- **Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992** places an overriding duty on employers to make workplaces suitable

for employees

- **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999** requires the employer to undertake suitable and sufficient risk assessments
- **Equality Act 2010** states that it is direct discrimination if a person (A) discriminates against another (B) if, because of a protected characteristic, (A) treats (B) less favourably than (A) treats or would treat others. In some circumstances, conditions arising from the menopause may also meet the definition of an "impairment" under the Equality Act, i.e. "a mental or physical impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long term adverse effect on that person's ability to carry out normal day to day activities'".

Further information and support

TUC Wales toolkit

The toolkit covers information about mapping your branch, conducting surveys, negotiating a policy, carrying out a risk assessment, case studies and much more:

English version:

https://wtuclearn.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Menopause%20toolkit%20Eng_0.pdf

Welsh version:

https://wtuclearn.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Menopause%20toolkit%20Cym_0.pdf

Menopause matters

www.menopausematters.co.uk

The British Menopause Society

www.thebms.org.uk

Menopause Support UK

www.menopausesupport.co.uk

TUC guidance on gender occupational safety and health

www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/GenderHS2017.pdf