



Royal College
of Midwives

Working with the **menopause**

Introduction

Thanks to high profile campaigns, there is far more awareness of the impact the menopause has on so many women in the workplace.

While some progress has been made, many employers have been slow to recognise that women experiencing the menopause may need support.

With a nearly entirely female workforce, almost a quarter of maternity staff could be experiencing the menopause at any one time, with 23% of staff aged between 45 and 54. It is vital that anyone who is struggling with menopausal symptoms is given support, advice and suitable adjustments to their work and workplace.

No one should suffer in silence.



In the RCM's member experience at work survey 2021, only 5% of respondents reported having asked for reasonable adjustments at work because of symptoms relating to the menopause. Of those who asked:

72%
said no
adjustments
were made

17%
said only some
adjustments
were made

11%
said all
adjustments
were made

This must change.

The menopause is an occupational health issue that is growing in importance.



The menopause

What is the menopause?

The menopause is the end of a woman's menstrual cycle and marks the end of her fertility.

Medically speaking, menopause is a point in time 12 months after a woman's last period.

Who is affected?

All women will experience the menopause at some point in their lives. For most, it begins between the ages of 45 and 55, and in the UK the average age at the start of the menopause is 51.

However, many women will go through the menopause earlier in their life. Approximately one in 100 women will experience it before the age of 40. This could be a premature menopause, or a menopause induced by medical treatment.

Not everyone who experiences the menopause is a woman. Trans, non-binary and intersex people can all go through the menopause.

What are the symptoms?

The menopause is different for every woman. There are a number of symptoms, the most common of which are as follows.

- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Sleep disturbances and insomnia
- Fatigue
- Poor concentration and memory
- Headaches
- Heavy, irregular or painful periods
- Vaginal itching, dryness and discomfort
- Loss of libido

Mental symptoms:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Mood swings
- Irritability
- Problems with memory
- Loss of confidence

The severity of all symptoms can vary in different individuals from mild to very significant.

The length of symptoms can also differ between women. For most people, symptoms gradually stop two to five years after they begin. However, some women experience symptoms for many more years.

Is there treatment?

Some women may take hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to combat the symptoms of menopause. These can include breast tenderness, bloating, nausea, leg cramps, headaches and indigestion.

Women experiencing symptoms from HRT treatment may also require support and adjustments in the workplace.

There are many factors and personal circumstances that can affect how someone experiences the menopause.

Some protected characteristics can influence the way the menopause affects an individual. The following examples are designed to illustrate the diversity of menopause experiences, and do not constitute an exhaustive list.

“Having suffered a terrible menopause that resulted in [the] need for mental health counselling and antidepressants, I feel this is an area for improvement”



How can it affect different people?

Age

For many women, the menopause coincides with other changes in their lives. The majority of women go through the menopause between 45 and 55, a mid-life stage often complicated by a variety of other changes. For example, someone might experience their children leaving home, or increasing caring responsibilities for ageing relatives. Women who experience earlier menopause may have to cope with the psychological distress of facing infertility at an early age.

Disability and pre-existing conditions

Disabled women, and those with pre-existing health conditions, can experience the menopause differently.

Many women report that the menopause seems to make existing health conditions worse, triggering or coinciding with a flare-up of symptoms.

Race

Some research has found that there is a variation in the average age at which the menopause takes place between women of different ethnic backgrounds.

There is some evidence that Black workers may experience the menopause earlier than other women.

Gender and sex

Trans, non-binary and intersex people can all experience the menopause.

Trans men will experience a natural menopause if their ovaries remain in place and they do not undergo hormone therapy. Conversely, if their ovaries and uterus are removed they can experience menopausal symptoms.

Trans women undertaking hormone therapy can experience menopausal-like symptoms if their hormone therapy is interrupted or their hormone level is unstable.

The menopause at work

The menopause is an occupational health issue. Around 80% of women will experience noticeable menopausal symptoms.

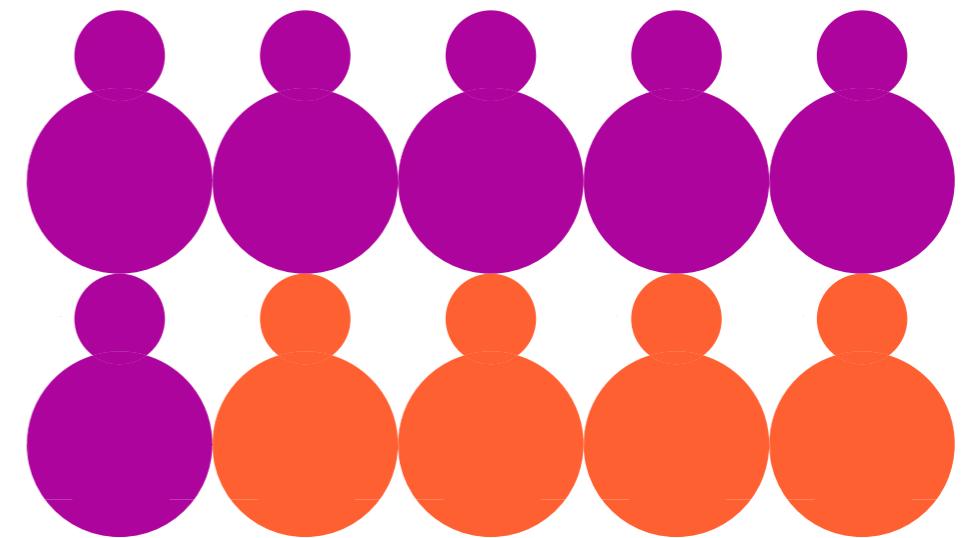
According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, six in every 10 women experiencing symptoms say it has a negative impact on their work.

The retirement age is set to increase over the coming years, meaning the number of women in the NHS workforce aged over 50 will also increase. That's why this issue is more important than ever.

Symptoms of the menopause can impact on a woman's job performance:

- Loss of sleep can reduce ability to concentrate and stay focused
- Hot flushes are physically distressing and can be embarrassing in front of colleagues
- Mood swings and irritability could impact a woman's relationship with others at work

Six in every 10 women experiencing symptoms say it has a negative impact on their work.



Managing symptoms can also make someone cut down on their hours, or be absent from work more frequently. Very severe symptoms could mean women cannot work at all.

However, in many workplaces it does not receive the attention it requires.

A 2017 TUC Wales survey found that almost a third (29.3%) of women with direct experience of the menopause felt it was treated negatively in their workplace. Almost six out of 10 (58.5%) reported witnessing the menopause being treated as a 'joke'.

Many women do not realise that they are legally entitled to support with their menopause symptoms.

“Previously I didn’t ask for adjustments when I probably needed it because I didn’t want to make a fuss when others were working hard. I didn’t want to let families and the service down. But working without caring for myself made me even more sick so after eight years of struggling I finally had to make some changes.”

Menopause and the law

Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act protects workers against discrimination and harassment.

The menopause is not a specific protected characteristic under the Equality Act. However, if a worker is put at a disadvantage because of their menopause symptoms, it could be discrimination on grounds of sex or age.

In some circumstances, conditions arising from the menopause may be considered a disability under the Equality Act. This would be the case if mental or physical symptoms of the menopause have a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Health and Safety at Work Act 1974

The Health and Safety at Work Act says employers must, where reasonably practical, ensure everyone's health, safety and welfare at work.

The RCM believes that employers have a responsibility to take into account the difficulties that women may experience during the menopause.

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Menopause in maternity units

With a predominantly female workforce, many of whom are in their late 40s to mid-50s, there will be a significant number of RCM members who are experiencing the menopause.

As of March 2022, 39% of midwives working in England were aged 45 and over. 22% of midwives were aged between 45 and 54 – the age at which the majority of women begin to experience menopausal symptoms. As over 99% of midwives are women, this means nearly a quarter of midwives could be experiencing the menopause at any one time.

Work in maternity units is physically, mentally and emotionally demanding.

The Agenda for Change profiles for roles within maternity units show that staff often need to use physical effort, need highly developed physical skills, need mental

concentration where the work pattern is unpredictable, and are often exposed to distressing or emotional circumstances.

The shift patterns worked by most midwives and MSWs can also exacerbate symptoms of the menopause such as fatigue and tiredness. This can, in turn, impact their job performance.

“Quite a few of us are going through the menopause and during the heatwave our unit was 80 degrees and above, in PPE, but we were just expected to get on with everything.”

Symptoms of the menopause can significantly affect maternity staff when carrying out their duties such as:

1. Poor concentration



2. Poor memory



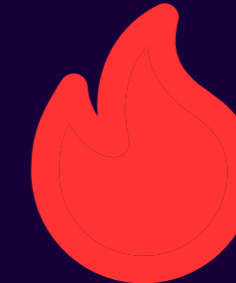
3. Sleep disturbances



4. Irritability



5. Hot flushes



Similarly, the symptoms of the menopause themselves can be worsened for midwives and MSWs at work by conditions in maternity units. These can include:

1. Not being able to take breaks (including toilet breaks)



2. High working temperatures



3. Strict uniform rules.



What can employers do?

All women should be able to expect support and help during the menopause.

Employers can support women in the following ways.

Access to flexible working

Managers should take a flexible and sympathetic approach to requests for breaks or even a return home. Guidance should be taken from the RCM's flexible working paper (www.rcm.org.uk/media/5412/flexible-working-guidance3.pdf).

Sickness absence policies

Sickness absence procedures should make it clear that they are flexible enough to cater for menopause-related sickness absence. Difficult symptoms relating to the menopause shouldn't be recorded in the same way as any other sickness issue. Instead, they should be recorded as an ongoing, long-term health condition rather than individual absences.

Adjustments in the workplace

Gender-specific risks assessments should be conducted that consider the specific needs of menopausal women and ensure the working environment will not worsen their symptoms. Issues that should be assessed include temperature, ventilation, toilet facilities and access to cold water.

Training for line managers

It is crucial that all line managers are aware of the symptoms of the menopause, understand how they can affect working women, and know what adjustments may be necessary to support them.

Support for mental health and well-being

All staff should have other points of contact available other than their line manager, as some women may feel uncomfortable talking to their manager about the menopause. This might be through human resources or a welfare officer.

“I wanted adjustments to day-only shifts due to my early menopause symptoms... I didn't ask as the culture is that we should just get on with things.”

Menopause awareness

Employers should work proactively to normalise the topic of the menopause in the workplace. This could involve a wider occupational health awareness campaign that highlights issues such as the menopause are highlighted to all staff. Guidance on how to deal with the menopause should be freely available in the workplace.

Above all, employers should be flexible in their approach to the menopause at work. Every individual will experience different symptoms for different lengths of time, and at different levels of severity. There must be, therefore, a range of adjustments and practices on offer.

RCM workplace representatives play an important role in challenging attitudes to the menopause, making sure employers have procedures in place, and offering support to members who are experiencing problems.

The RCM is here to support all reps who are tackling menopause issues at work and offer training and education resources on the menopause in the workplace. Reps should contact their regional officer or organiser for more details.



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Approach employers

Reps should raise the issue of the menopause with employers and managers using the information in this guide to make sure the workplace meets the needs of menopausal women. It is important that you make your employer aware of the benefits to them of looking after staff health, safety and well-being.

Work with members

It is important that reps consult with members to find out what support they need in the workplace. This could be in the form of a survey or mapping exercise. For examples of relevant exercises, please see the Wales TUC Menopause Toolkit (www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Menopause%20toolkit%20Eng%20FINAL.pdf).

Support members

An RCM rep should be someone that members experiencing the menopause can go to and discuss any difficulties they

“I really think that we are all about caring for women, [but] we forget to care for us But I found some symptoms to be really debilitating.”

are having. Members might need help balancing the demands of their work and the symptoms of the menopause.

They might also need support to approach managers about gaining adjustments at work, or working flexibly.

When representing members who are struggling with the menopause at work it is vital to have meaningful conversations about their needs, so reps know what to ask for from their organisation. No two people who go through the menopause experience it in the same way, so it's important that reps take the time to understand what a member is going through.

Organising members

If there are a number of people experiencing the same difficulties at work, reps may consider holding an RCM branch meeting to discuss issues to do with the menopause, and what measures members would find useful to help them. Reps could also form workplace support groups for women going through the menopause.





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