



The Prince's
Responsible
Business Network



MENOPAUSE IN THE WORKPLACE

A practical guide for HR, Wellbeing and
Occupational Health practitioners



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Business in the Community is a registered charity in
England and Wales (297716) and Scotland (SC046226).
Company limited by guarantee No. 1619253.

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FOREWORD

The UK workforce is ageing. People want and need to work for longer and employers need to draw more effectively on an older workforce.

For women this is particularly true – they have been the major drivers of growth in the older workforce over the last decade. Both social and policy changes have been at work here. Many more women now return to work after childbirth, and the reform of the pension system has extended women's working lives. There are now almost five million women over 50 in the workplace, and many will be transitioning through menopause.

In earlier decades, much of the menopause was experienced after women had retired or left the workforce early to take up caring responsibilities. This is clearly no longer the case and now menopause is very much a workplace issue. All women will transition through menopause, and most women experience symptoms which impact on their quality of life in some way. But with the right support, those symptoms can be effectively managed, and women can continue successfully at work.

Leading employers are finding that it makes business sense to support employees during menopause, building retention of a key workplace demographic and retaining valuable knowledge, skills and experience. But every woman's experience of menopause is unique, and employers need to consider a range of actions to provide effective support.

The experience of these leading employers has shown that often quite simple actions, such as education and awareness-raising, can make a real difference. In this way we can normalise menopause at work so that it becomes as unremarkable a topic as risk assessment during pregnancy or support for long-term medical conditions.

New research is providing fresh insights into the realities of women's experience of menopause in the workplace. This toolkit includes research findings from academics at the leading edge of inquiry into female reproductive health and its impact on the workplace. It also showcases how employers at the forefront of the age-friendly workplace agenda are rising to the challenge of supporting their older female staff and suggests frameworks for action based on best practice.





Business in the Community (BITC) aims to make the UK the world leader for responsible business. Our age campaign provides employers with the tools and insight they need to support a growing older workforce and shares best practice to promote productive, truly age-inclusive workplaces in which men and women of all ages can thrive.

This toolkit has been produced by Business in the Community in collaboration with The Open University, University of Bristol and De Montfort University. We would also like to thank BITC members who have shared their evidence and experience to help us identify the practical business actions that really make a difference. We hope you find the insights and advice helpful.



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WHAT IS MENOPAUSE?

Menopause is the transitional period during which women move out of the reproductive phase of their lives.ⁱ However, its impact extends beyond the biological context, with a range of psychological and social impacts relating to the broader experiences of women in later life. Menopause becomes inter-related with women's experiences in the workplace, in their families and as they are expected to take up socially traditional female roles such as caring.

Cultural factors are also at play, with different groups adopting differing interpretations of menopause as a medical or a more natural process. There is also some evidence of variation in experience on a racial and ethnic basis, possibly indicating that BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) women may enter menopause earlier than other women. New research will explore this further.

Unlike pregnancy and childbirth, menopause is experienced by all women, including trans and non-binary people assigned female

identity at birth and whose female biological characteristics persist. But it is important to understand that menopause is not just a women's issue. The effects are felt at work, in relationships, in families and in society as a whole. So, when seeking to raise awareness of the issue, it is important to include and take account of the perspectives of younger women and of men too.

Onset of Menopause

Menopause usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age. In the UK, the average age for a woman to reach menopause is 51, but around 1 in 100 women will experience menopause before they reach 40.¹

Symptoms can start before reaching menopause (perimenopause) and can persist for several years afterwards (post-menopause). Although menopause is defined medically as an event, in the workplace it is more appropriately viewed as a transition as symptoms are typically experienced over a number of years.

ⁱ In clinical terms it is the point at which a woman has not had a period for 12 months.





At any age, women undergoing certain medical procedures, such as removal of ovaries or cancer treatments, can experience a medically induced menopause, which may be both sudden and severe.²

Symptoms

Most women will experience menopausal symptoms. These can vary extensively, and different women experience both different symptoms and different levels of severity of symptoms. Evidence suggests that around 80 per cent of women experience menopausal symptoms which interfere with their quality of life, and 25 per cent of women describe their symptoms as being severe.³

Common symptoms include:^{4,5}

- hot flushes – intermittent short, sudden feelings of heat, usually in the face, neck and chest, which can make your skin red and sweaty
- night sweats and difficulty sleeping
- problems with concentration – sometimes called ‘brain fog’
- headaches and migraines
- mood changes, low mood and anxiety
- palpitations – heartbeats that suddenly become more noticeable
- joint stiffness, aches and pains
- recurrent urinary tract infections

Some of these symptoms may be exacerbated through a domino effect, with one symptom causing another, for example night sweats leading to problems sleeping.⁶

Always be aware that menopause is a medical condition. The advice provided in this toolkit relates to practical actions to support women in the workplace. Any individual who is facing issues with symptoms should always be advised to seek medical advice from a GP.





HOW MENOPAUSE IMPACTS WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

Impact on work

Our research partners at Bristol, De Montfort and The Open University have found that significant numbers of women find symptoms associated with the menopause transition problematic at work. Research by the University of Bristol⁷ has found that the top five menopausal symptoms reported as having a significant impact on women at work are:

- fatigue 40 per cent of respondents
- hot flushes (often related to stress) 35 per cent
- focus and concentration 34 per cent
- anxiety and worry 32 per cent
- insomnia 30 per cent

Evidence of the negative impact of menopausal symptoms on performance at work is not conclusive. However, poor working environments and high levels of stress make symptoms more difficult to deal with. The most challenging aspects of work to cope with are:

- short or changing deadlines
- long hours
- high workload
- dealing with customers or clients⁸

Evidence shows that in response, women may:

- hide and/or self-manage their symptoms
- develop a degree of paranoia about how their performance might be affected
- work harder to compensate⁹

The ITV Wellbeing of Women Survey¹⁰ found that 50 per cent of women said that work made menopausal symptoms worse and 25 per cent had considered giving up work as a result.

Attitudes to menopause at work

Evidence generally suggests a negative attitude to menopause at work. Women report lack of support and unhelpful attitudes from colleagues and managers. The University of Bristol¹¹ found that:

- only 23 per cent of women said that menopause was something they could talk about at work
- over 63 per cent said menopause is not well understood
- 30 per cent said that their experience of discussion of menopause at work was that it was joked about
- nearly 50 per cent agreed or somewhat agreed that menopause is a taboo subject





Disclosure of menopause at work

Attitudes are very important as evidence shows that women are often reluctant to disclose their menopause status at work. The University of Bristol¹² found that:

- only 46 per cent of survey respondents had disclosed their menopause status at work
- only 24 per cent had disclosed to their line manager and less than 3 per cent to an occupational health professional
- only 16 per cent of disclosures had been made to men

The primary reasons for not disclosing menopause status at work were:

- it is a private issue
- I will be perceived negatively
- my abilities would be questioned¹³

Disclosure should always be a matter of personal choice. However, if women feel prevented from disclosing their menopause status due to attitudes of colleagues and managers, they will be prevented from accessing the support which is available in the workplace, or seeking more individual solutions.

Businesses need to respond to these challenges by providing and publicising appropriate support for women, raising awareness and making space for conversations about menopause in the workplace. Practical action steps are considered in detail in the later section, 'What employers can do to help'.



WHY MENOPAUSE IS IMPORTANT FOR EMPLOYERS

Retaining older workers

- By 2020, one in three workers will be over 50.¹⁴ In the next 10 years there will be 13.5 million job vacancies and only 7 million school and college leavers to fill them.¹⁵ Retaining older workers will be key to meeting future demand for staff and also retaining crucial knowledge and skills within organisations.
- The biggest increases in employment rates over the last 30 years have been for women over 50. Employment of women aged 55 to 59 has increased from 49 per cent to 69 per cent and for women over 60 from 18 per cent to 41 per cent. Over the same period, the gap between employment rates for men and women aged 50-64 has fallen from 28 per cent to 11 per cent.¹⁶ Unification of the State Pension Age has continued to drive this trend.
- There are now almost five million women over 50 in work.¹⁷ Given that the average age for entering the menopause is 51, this means that there are potentially some five million menopausal women in the workforce. Look at your data to understand how many menopausal women may be in your workforce. BITC's [toolkit](#) 'Getting Started on Age: Look, Listen, Act' can help you with this.¹⁸

Reducing the gender pay gap

- The gender pay gap is widest for women over 50.¹⁹ Action to reduce the gap where it is highest will have a significant impact on reducing the gap overall.
- Women can struggle to balance experience of menopause with engagement in the workplace. If they end up reducing their hours or missing out on opportunities for career progression, a company's gender pay gap may well be adversely affected.
- Approaches designed to help menopausal women remain in quality jobs, with access to training and development, will be important to strategies aiming to reduce the gender pay gap in businesses.





Reducing business costs

- Recruitment, training and turnover are key costs for business. Improving retention rates is an important way to control these costs.
- Improved health and wellbeing will also improve productivity and reduce costs from absence.
- Women experiencing menopause transition report that work makes menopausal symptoms worse. Some find the stress of work too much and, if they are not properly supported, may give up work altogether.²⁰
- Menopause is also experienced during a broader transitional period for women in later life when they may be taking on additional caring responsibilities or have teenage or young adult children still at or leaving home. These pressures can add to the risk of early departure from the workforce.
- Turnover costs are high. Replacing staff incurs costs from exit procedures and in lost productivity while posts are vacant. Research consultancy Oxford Economics found it costs an average of £30,000 to replace an employee and train a replacement to the same level.²¹

Reducing business risk

- Businesses which fail to support women during menopause put themselves at legal risk. There have already been two successful employment tribunal claims in relation to the menopause.
- Under Health and Safety legislation, employers have a duty of care to ensure the health, welfare and wellbeing of their employees.²²
- Under The Equality Act 2010, employers have a duty not to discriminate against employees, and they are required to treat employees with respect in terms of their age and gender. The menopause is a strictly female condition, so any detrimental treatment of a woman related to the menopause could represent direct or indirect sex discrimination.²³
- Under The Equality Act 2010, employers have a duty not to discriminate against employees on the basis of disability. If a woman experiences such serious symptoms from the menopause transition that they amount to a mental or physical impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on her ability to carry out day-to-day activities, this could be classed as a disability under the Act.²⁴





WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO TO HELP

Awareness-raising and communication

In order to break the taboo of menopause, employers need to raise awareness of and normalise menopause at work. Understanding of menopause is low across the workforce. Awareness-raising needs to be directed at the whole workforce, to include women in or approaching menopause, younger women and male staff.

Employers need to encourage the development of organisational values within which menopause is treated as a natural process and mid-life women are confident to request support and adjustments to their working conditions. Women also need to know what support is available. Studies indicate that support from others is important and that women are more likely to speak up about symptoms where they feel they have empathetic colleagues or managers.²⁵

Plan a programme of awareness-raising on menopause at work, for example a wellbeing or occupational health campaign, seminars or sign-posting to online resources such as linked via the Henpicked website.²⁶ It has been found that sharing videos about symptoms and experiences of menopause can be a particularly effective initial step.

Environmental and physical adjustments

The physical environment can worsen menopausal symptoms and increase stress at work. Problems are often caused by high workplace temperatures, poor ventilation, inadequate rest or toilet facilities and even simple matters such as lack of access to cold drinking water.

Evidence shows²⁷ that where the following are provided, the experience of menopausal women in the workplace is improved:

- fans and good ventilation
- temperature control
- comfortable toilet facilities including access to women-only showers if possible
- cold drinking water
- appropriate clothing – if uniforms are required, options should be available which are light, layered and non-synthetic
- rest areas
- natural light
- reduction in noise exposure





Policies and procedures

Make sure your policies and procedures include provision for support for menopausal women. In a survey by the University of Bristol,²⁸ it was found that:

- 60 per cent of respondents said that their workplace did not provide any information about the menopause
- only 10 per cent said that their organisation had a menopause policy or guidance

Policies and procedures might include any of the strategies discussed in this section.

Absence policies

It is important that your sickness absence policy accommodates women experiencing menopause transition. Record any sickness absences that are related to the menopause as an ongoing health issue instead of a series of short-term absences. This will ensure that your sickness absence procedure will not be unnecessarily implemented and will provide peace of mind to your employees when they discuss their health needs.

Nearly one in three respondents to a survey by the TUC reported management criticism of menopause-related sick leave.²⁹



Flexible working

Women may suffer from fatigue, anxiety and depression because of menopausal symptoms. Be accommodating to flexible working requests that will help women manage their health issues. Flexible working can lead to a reduction in absenteeism and an increase in wellbeing and productivity, and build retention in your older workforce.

Remember that menopause is a transition and that experiences can change over time. Be prepared to implement flexible working in a responsive manner. Evidence shows that flexible working arrangements may only be required temporarily.³⁰

Flexibility and other adjustments to working patterns might include:

- the ability to rearrange tasks and meetings on bad days
- allowing women to take breaks where needed
- allowing women to work flexible hours and/or at home, especially on bad days or when they have slept poorly
- allowing women to take days off if required or to leave work early, perhaps to resume working later in the day or evening at home
- ensuring time is made available during the working day to attend medical appointments



Training for line managers

Provide training for line managers to ensure that they understand how menopausal symptoms may affect women in the workplace, and the policies and procedures you have in place to support menopausal women. Training should include development of listening skills and sensitivity, and guidance on how to have difficult conversations.³¹ Again, videos on the impact and symptoms of menopause can be very helpful, such as those linked via the Henpicked website.³²

Encourage line managers to seek support from specialists in HR and occupational health units if they are uncertain on how to approach a menopause issue in their team.

45 per cent of respondents to a TUC survey said their managers did not recognise problems associated with the menopause.³³

Support groups

Supportive organisational cultures will allow the provision of informal support for mid-life women during menopause transition. This can be an easy way to make a start, drawing on a peer support approach to set up a women's network or a menopause café, an informal group where women in menopause can meet and share in a safe space.

Other options include online discussion forums and helplines.

Once formed, groups can act as focus groups, providing information and feedback on policies, plus champion the issue in your business.

Specialist support for menopausal women

Specialist support has been found to be effective in making the experience of work better for menopausal women. Educational programmes can help with managing symptoms and provide advice on diet and exercise, and also support women as they prepare for the possible consequences of menopause transition at work.³⁴

Cognitive behavioural therapy has also been found to be beneficial in controlling symptoms and has been effectively offered by employers participating in research programmes.^{35, 36}

These forms of support might be offered in-house or by external independent experts, perhaps through an employee assistance programme.

Mid-life MOTs are also very helpful to provide space for conversations between employers and employees in mid-life, and allow people to consider how their work might need to adjust to their circumstances. Advice on implementing a mid-life MOT can be found in BITC's [toolkit](#).³⁷





RESOURCES

Business in the Community has produced a wide range of toolkits and fact sheets designed to help you retain, retrain and recruit older workers which you can find on our website [age resources pages](#).

BITC resources you may find helpful when developing support for employees transitioning through menopause include:

[Getting Started on Age: Look, Listen, Act](#)

[The Mid-Life MOT: Helping employees navigate mid-life - a toolkit for Senior & HR Managers to drive the benefits of retaining older workers](#)

[The Mid-Life MOT: Getting Started – Supporting mid-life employees to plan for their future](#)

You can also find helpful guidance from official sources and BITC partner organisations.

[Government Equalities Office report on menopause and women's economic participation](#)

[NHS website menopause pages](#)

[Lecture given by Professor Jo Brewis at the Open University in 2019 on menopause in the workplace](#)

[The British Menopause Society](#)

[Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace](#)

[Daisy Network: premature menopause or POI](#)

[Menopause Cafe](#)





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