

Menopause Factsheet

Why is the menopause a workplace issue?

Women are roughly half of the UK workforce and about three and a half million are over the age of 50, nearly all of whom will be experiencing the menopause.

For some women it means particular difficulties at work, may even lead to discriminatory action by employers, yet it's not something we usually talk about.

Time and again research shows that there is a cumulative impact of the government's austerity measures on women's equality and it is important that we take action to support women's employment. And that includes addressing this common workplace issue for many.

What is the menopause?

The menopause is a natural stage in a woman's life, usually happening between the ages of 45 and 55, marked by changes in the hormones and the ending of menstruation. It can last from four to eight years. The years during which the oestrogen levels decline before a woman has her last period is called the perimenopause.

What are the associated symptoms?

These can include hot flushes, palpitations, headaches, night sweats and sleep disturbance, fatigue, poor concentration, irritability, mood disturbance, skin irritation and dryness. Women can also experience urinary problems with recurrent infections or a need to pass urine more often, heavy, irregular periods for a time and vaginal discomfort.

How does the menopause affect women at work?

The effects on a woman's physical and emotional health can significantly impact on how she does her work and her relationships with her colleagues.

UNISON believes that employers have a responsibility to take into account difficulties women may experience during the menopause, not least under health and safety legislation, and to take account of these in sickness absence policies.

What employers should do?

Are managers aware of the issues and how they can affect their staff?

- For example, all line managers should be trained to be aware of how the menopause can affect work and what adjustments may be necessary to support women.

- Women should experience no detriment because they may need time off during this period, and any sickness absence procedure should be flexible enough to cater for this.

Do women feel confident enough to raise issues about their symptoms and ask for adjustments at work?

- For example, guidance on how to deal with the menopause should be freely available in the workplace, and included in wider occupational health awareness campaigns so that everyone knows that the employer has a positive attitude to the issue.
- Women may feel more comfortable speaking to someone from human resources, a welfare officer or from an employer assistance programme, particularly if their line manager is male.
- Safety representatives and stewards should challenge unhelpful and discriminatory attitudes at work and openly support women experiencing problems.

Do conditions at work take account of the difficulties that some women experience during the menopause?

- For example, there should be opportunities for women to be able to negotiate flexible working hours or practices in order to deal with their symptoms.
- Women should have some control of the temperature in their working environment, perhaps by being provided with an electric fan or allowed to adapt their uniform.
- There should be adequate toilet facilities, toilet breaks and access to cold drinking water.

Where can I get more information?

- The menopause and work: a guide for UNISON safety reps
www.unison.org.uk/onlinecatalogue
- Working through the change: health and safety and the menopause
www.tuc.org.uk/workplace/tuc-6316-f0
- NHS menopause guidance
www.nhs.uk/Livewell/menopause/Pages/Menopausehome.aspx