



Public Health
England

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Knowledge & Library Services (KLS) Evidence Briefing

**What can employers do to support women going through the
menopause?**

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19th August 2019

Research question

This Evidence Briefing (EB) summarises the evidence on what employers can do to support women going through the menopause, from 1st January 2009 to 17th July 2019.

Key messages

- There are around 4.3 million women in employment in the UK aged 50 years and over, most of whom will experience the menopause and its symptoms.
- The limited evidence on the impact of interventions by employers to support women going through the menopause, all make similar recommendations.
- Most women will go through the menopause, but the severity of their symptoms will vary.
- When identifying suitable interventions, employers should remember that one size does not fit all, and individual characteristics, work, and lifestyle, must be considered.
- Menopausal symptoms can have a significant impact on the quality of life of women and on workplace performance.
- Women who work in public-facing roles, such as teachers, can find it particularly hard, when experiencing menopausal symptoms at work, because it may be difficult to take breaks when they need to.
- Symptom prevalence and severity can be affected by ethnicity.
- It is essential that systems are in place enabling women to converse freely with someone they trust in the organisation.
- Employers have a duty of care to ensure that working conditions do not generate or worsen health in their employees.
- Employers need to create a safe and comfortable environment where women can effectively work, while transitioning through natural stages of their life course
- Employers need to know the health and wellbeing implications of the menopause, so that they can effectively manage a growing, ageing workforce.

Evidence briefings are a summary of the best available evidence that has been selected from research using a systematic and transparent method in order to answer a specific question.

What doesn't this briefing do?

The findings from research papers summarised here have **not** been quality assessed or critically appraised.

Who is this briefing for?

Deputy Director – Workforce, in the People Directorate, at Public Health England.

Information about this evidence briefing

This briefing draws upon a literature search of the sources CINAHL, Embase, Medline, NICE Evidence Search, PsycInfo, TRIP Database, and Google, from 1st January 2009 to 17th July 2019.

32 highly relevant citations were used to produce this evidence briefing.

At least 51 additional papers were considered to be 'of interest' and details can be obtained on request.

You may request any publications referred to in this briefing from libraries@phe.gov.uk

Disclaimer

The information in this report summarises evidence from a literature search - it may not be representative of the whole body of evidence available. Although every effort is made to ensure that the information presented is accurate, articles and internet resources may contain errors or out of date information. No critical appraisal or quality assessment of individual articles has been performed. No responsibility can be accepted for any action taken on the basis of this information.

Background

The focus of this Evidence Briefing (EB) is to look at interventions that employers could implement to improve the quality of life of working women as they go through the menopause.

A literature search was conducted on 6 clinical databases: CINAHL, Embase, Medline, NICE Evidence Search, PsycInfo, TRIP Database, and Google. Date and language limits were applied, so that only English language papers published between 1st January 2009 and 17th July 2019 were included. In total, 83 papers were identified, and of those, 32 met the criteria for inclusion as defined in the [inclusion/exclusion criteria](#). The search strategy is available [here](#). The EB provides data about the extent to which menopausal symptoms affect women in the workplace, a brief overview of the legal situation, followed by a description of interventions suggested by professional organisations, such as Trades Union Congress, Royal College of Nursing, and the NHS, and examples provided by case studies.

It should be noted, however, that *“there is a lack of empirical evidence that the interventions outlined so far work”* (2).

Context

“Women are living longer, working more and retiring later” (3). There are around 4.3 million women in employment in the UK aged 50 years and over, most of whom will experience the menopause and its symptoms (3-9). In the NHS, 77% of the workforce are women (10). While the menopause usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55 (6, 11), in the UK, the average age for a woman to undergo the menopause is 51 years. However, it is important to realise that around 1 in 100 women can experience it before the age of 40 years. It is *“estimated that 13 million or around 1 in 3 women are either currently going through or have reached the menopause”*, in the UK (1, 10, 12). Some evidence shows that women find it hard to manage menopausal symptoms at work, particularly in certain situations, *“such as formal meetings, working with men and/or younger colleagues, and working in hot or poorly ventilated environments”*. In one paper, it was observed that some women are perceived to be difficult to manage, because their employers do not understand what happens during the menopause, and therefore do not recognise the symptoms (13).

The menopause is not an illness. It is part of the natural ageing process for women, but it can present many symptoms (1, 12). Most women experience symptoms, but these vary, with some women going through a more debilitating experience than others (3, 8), and which will affect their personal and professional lives (8).

Symptoms include:

- psychological issues such as mood disturbances, anxiety and/or depression, memory loss, panic attacks, loss of confidence and reduced concentration
- hot flushes (brief and sudden surges of heat usually felt in the face, neck and chest)
- sleep disturbance that can make people feel tired and irritable • night sweats (hot flushes that happen during the night)

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- irregular periods and/or periods can become light or heavy
- muscle and joint stiffness, aches and pains
- recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs) including cystitis
- headaches
- weight gain
- heart palpitations
- skin changes (dryness, acne, general itchiness)
- reduced sex drive (3, 4, 6, 11, 12, 14, 15).

Hot flushes and insomnia result in poor concentration levels and tiredness (8, 13, 16). *“Tiredness and night sweats can make women temporarily more susceptible to fatigue and stress at work, which are linked to risks of reduced immune response and increased susceptibility to infection”* (13).

One document (17), includes a useful diagram on page 202, providing an overview of menopausal symptoms, and which parts of the body are affected. Menopausal symptoms can have a significant impact on the quality of life of women and on workplace performance (16-18).

The menopause affects many biological systems, including central nervous system, cognition, metabolic system, cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems, urogenital, skin, and sexual functionality. The symptoms can be distressing, particularly when they occur at work, and research shows that symptom prevalence and severity can be affected by ethnicity, and geographical location – women in African, Latin American, Asian, or Middle Eastern countries start the menopause earlier, than in Europe, Australia, and the USA (6, 17, 19). In some cultures, there is a more positive attitude to menopause, because of their better attitude to ageing (1).

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and other treatments have improved the quality of life for women transitioning in to menopause, but there are still issues with regards to occupational health (20). Some women *“have significantly higher utilization and productivity burdens”* (21). Women who work in public-facing roles, such as teachers, can find it particularly hard, when experiencing menopausal symptoms at work, because it may be difficult to take breaks when they need to (1, 11, 13).

“Issues arising at work as a result of the menopause should be appropriately handled” (3). Six out of ten women going through the menopause will find that their symptoms have a negative effect on their working lives (22), but because of the taboo of talking openly about the menopause at work, they may suffer in silence (17, 23). *“Menopause is still seen as a private issue”* (24), and women find it difficult to talk to their line managers about menopause-related problems, which can be a barrier to providing support (6, 7, 18, 25). In a recent study (5), it was found that while one third of women take at least four days off work due to menstruation-related symptoms, they did not feel comfortable to report the reason. Increasing awareness of symptoms and providing coping strategies might help (17). Women may experience shame and embarrassment (3, 5, 18), sometimes due to a lack of understanding in the working environment (17). In a survey conducted by TUC

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Wales, one of the observations was that greater awareness about menopause is required, and increased knowledge for all, including managers, particularly male ones, and younger female workers, who may also be ignorant of the condition. The survey found that while women going through the menopause were comfortable talking to female line managers, they felt embarrassed talking to male managers, particularly young men. Some women were worried about reprisals at work, if they raised the issue of menopause (1). *“Job stress is an increasingly important factor of the rising number of menopausal women in the workplace”*, and, along with stigma, can exacerbate symptoms (13, 16, 26).

In the current workforce, women over 50 are the fastest growing segment, and will transition through the menopause during their working lives (23). Therefore, it is important for employers to realise that a *“one size fits all” approach to menopause transition in the workplace will not be effective* (2).

“Organizational changes may reduce the burden of menopausal symptoms in the workplace” (6). This EB presents a range of low-cost options for employers to implement, to overcome these barriers, and support women who are experiencing symptoms, as they go through the menopause.

Evidence shows that where health and wellbeing are supported in the workplace, absenteeism and presenteeism is reduced and productivity and job satisfaction is improved, so it makes sense to invest in interventions to support women going through the menopause (4).

Other factors which impact on the work ability during menopause, include women *“being un-partnered, obese or overweight, smoking, being a carer, and having insecure housing finance, but not with age”* (27).

The aim of one piece of research, carried out at a Japanese company, was to prevent women from retiring from work due to symptoms associated with the menopause. The findings stressed the importance of creating *“an office environment in which all female employees are able to work safely and comfortably”*. In this paper, there is a table, on page 108, which describes the roles and responsibilities of the employer and the employee in terms of improving quality of life and productivity. During their research, the authors made the following observations:

- It is not easy to distinguish between menopausal disorders and mental health issues.
- When identifying suitable interventions, employers should remember that one size does not fit all, and individual characteristics, work, and lifestyle, must be considered.
- Roles of staff members, including occupational health staff, line managers, and co-workers, must be clarified.
- Organisations must *“systematically address menopausal disorders and mental health issues”* (28).

Legal situation

Employers have a duty of care, both legally and morally to ensure that working conditions do not generate or worsen health in their employees (6). The following paragraphs in the textbox, about the law, with regards to menopause in the

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workplace, have been directly quoted from the Wales Trades Union Congress report, *The menopause: A workplace issue*, published in 2017:

“The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) requires employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all workers. Under the Act, employers are required to do risk assessments under the Management Regulations which should include specific risks to menopausal women if they are employed. Risk assessments should consider the specific needs of menopausal women and ensure that the working environment will not make their symptoms worse. Issues that need looking at include temperature and ventilation. The assessments should also address welfare issues such as toilet facilities and access to cold water.

The Equality Act (2010) prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex. This includes direct discrimination, indirect discrimination and harassment. An example of sex discrimination relating to the menopause would be an employer who refuses to take symptoms caused by the menopause into account as a mitigating factor in the application of a performance management policy, when it could be reasonably assumed that similar symptoms (e.g. memory problems) arising from other conditions would have been taken into account as a mitigating factor for male members of staff.

The Equality Act also prohibits discrimination on the grounds of disability. The menopause is not in itself a disability, but conditions arising from it may meet the definition of an ‘impairment’ under the Equality Act. For example if someone has depression or urinary problems linked to the menopause, and those conditions have a substantial and long term adverse effect on that person’s ability to carry out normal day to day activities then that person would be considered to have a disability under the Act” (1).

Interventions

Any long-term, health condition requires the appropriate support from management, to ensure that the employee feels confident to carry out their duties effectively. This support encourages employee loyalty, and enables women to work longer, which means that employers do not lose the experience that they have invested in (12).

“Physical (e.g., workplace temperature and design) and psychosocial (e.g., work stress, perceptions of control/autonomy) workplace factors have been found to influence the relationship between symptoms [of menopause] and work” (7).

Employers need to create an environment where women going through natural stages of their life course, can function effectively, without judgement or discrimination, and the ability to access help when required (5, 28). Several papers found that increased awareness and communication about menopause in work settings helped improve the working situation for women transitioning in to menopause (13). *“Employers need to know the health and wellbeing implications of the menopause, in order to effectively manage the ageing, gender equal workforce of the future” (24).*

The papers included in this EB have suggested a number of targeted interventions which can ease the menopausal transition:

Raising awareness or managers and co-workers (1, 4, 6, 11, 16, 23-25)

- Specific training for managers on:
 - approaching a sensitive conversation
 - what menopause is
 - how menopausal symptoms affect women in the workplace, and know what reasonable adjustments are required
 - what sort of things to focus on during a risk assessment of someone going through the menopause
 - how to get further support from the Health and Safety Executive
 - how to manage health issues and performance
- Provision of training, with supporting material, for all staff, to reduce stigma and embarrassment, and help co-workers understand what menopausal colleagues are experiencing, and how best to support them.
- Healthy ageing campaigns for all life courses.

Management role (8, 11, 13, 23)

- Organisations should ensure that future policies include support for employees who are going through the menopause.
- Risk assessments for women going through the menopause should be provided.
- Reduce performance targets where necessary to reduce stress.
- Sensitive, approachable, and flexible attitudes from managers are important in managing women going through the menopause.
- Confidentiality should be maintained at all times.
- Managers should not make assumptions – everyone is different and should be treated as suits them best. Changes should be made that suit the individual.
- Creating an open culture for discussions about health-related issues, and other sensitive topics – asking all employees how they are, and encouraging them to raise any concerns.
- Regular and informal one-to-ones can encourage trust and approachability.

Reducing work stress (1, 13)

- Managers need to monitor workload, workplace bullying, and harassment to reduce stress in women going through the menopause.
- Where possible, workload should be reduced, when necessary, and relaxation opportunities, such as additional breaks, provided.

Flexible working (1, 4, 16, 17, 24)

- Flexible working hours/arrangements to accommodate women suffering from exhaustion, anxiety and depression, as part of the menopausal transition – this can include - changes to the number of hours worked, flexible start/finish times, or options such as home working or job sharing.

Physical environment (1, 4, 6, 13, 16, 17, 24)

- Reviews of, and improvements to, workplace ventilation and temperature.

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- If temperature is an issue, allow women to move to another office with more ventilation, for fresh air, or adjust the temperature as appropriate.
- Ensure access to cold drinking water, desk fans, and light boxes.
- Provide access to toilet facilities, with sanitary products, for women who cannot afford them.
- Allow more breaks if necessary, with space for staff to relax, e.g. staff room.
- Space for women to change clothes, and wash, if necessary.
- Provision of uniforms made of natural fabrics rather than artificial fibres, and a wider choice of garments so that women feel comfortable.
- Access to natural light to prevent issues such as lack of calcium or low mood.

Additional support (1, 6, 16, 24, 25, 29)

- Better access to informal and formal networks for support and discussion about menopause in the workplace.
- Refer employee to occupational health, or encourage self-referral, if both parties feel this is appropriate.
- Organisations could appoint a specific person in Human Resources or Occupational Health, preferably female to provide support to managers and employees.
- Access to a helpline or information service, where women can get guidance on dealing with the menopause in the workplace and help with dealing with work-related problems. This is particularly important for women dealing with anxiety and depression.
- Provision of better and more widely available training for GPs on the menopause.
- Pension providers providing services to employees on managing health-related issues.

Dealing with sickness absences (1, 24)

- Sickness absences should be recorded as ongoing health issues, instead of a series of short term absences.
- Managers should be flexible and sympathetic if menopausal women feel ill at work and need a break or need to go home.

Case studies

A number of papers included case studies (30):

- North Lincolnshire County Council's Diversity team have produced guidance for their managers on making reasonable adjustments in the workplace for women going through the menopause. The guidance includes two toolkits, outlining more than 50 examples of workplace adjustments. It covers topics including cultural change, specialist advice, transition-specific policies, an informal support form, job role reviews, and flexible working arrangements. Information is also included about training and what it should include, e.g. equality and diversity, sensitivity and listening skills, and support from occupational health, absence policies, and support groups (2).

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- At the Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital, the employment counsellor describes how they set up a workplace support group in the hospital. The group held four sessions with mid-life and younger women and supervisors, and the aim was to educate them about what happens in menopause transition, and how to manage symptoms, flexible working, and changes to workplace environments. It was an opportunity for women to meet and support each other, and was very oversubscribed (2).
- In 2010, Marks and Spencer developed a health and wellbeing website for their employees called Your Wellbeing. The site includes a Manage Your Menopause micro-site, which includes a video about and tips on coping with the menopause and information for line managers on supporting women through transition. The organisation also enables referrals to a specialist team within their Occupational Health and Employee Support services where necessary and robust policies covering menopause-related absence (2).
- Henpicked is an organisation that has collected a number of case studies on menopause at work, and they are all available [here](#), and include:
 - How can the police force retain and recruit female employees over 40?
 - From Severn Trent to menopause in the workplace
 - The menopause at work: Why HR need to lead the way
 - Menopause and work: Why it's so important
 - What do working menopausal women want?
 - Menopause in the workplace events across the UK
 - Leicestershire County Council: Menopause at work
 - Does menopause in the workplace support or threaten equality?
 - Menopause in the workplace is a win-win
 - Trade Unions' role in supporting menopause in the workplace
 - Notts Police menopause policy
 - What employers should know about menopause in the workplace (31).
- Simply Hormones is an organisation which delivers menopause workshops in workplaces to discuss the impact of the menopause in the workplace. The workshops are tailored to line/HR managers, occupational health nurses and managers, and women's groups. Each workshop outlines what the menopause is, when it happens, its symptoms, the challenges it brings about and how to tackle these successfully (4).

Summary

Employers have a duty of care, both legally and morally to ensure that working conditions do not generate or worsen health in their employees (6). Employers need to create an environment where women going through natural stages of their life course, can function effectively, feel safe, and confident to access help when required.

Available guidance

Several organisations have produced toolkits and further guidance, and these are available here (32):

The menopause at work: guidance for people professionals

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

March 2019

This guide is the outcome of research conducted by CIPD to understand what is needed from employers to support their staff who are going through the menopause.

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/menopause/people-professionals-guidance>

Menopause and the workplace guidance: what to consider

British Menopause Society

February 2019

This factsheet provides a 'how-to' guide for employers and relevant staff within organisations that are considering writing their own guidance on the menopause.

<https://thebms.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/07-BMS-TfC-Menopause-and-the-workplace-02C.pdf>

Guidance on menopause and the workplace

Faculty of Occupational Medicine of the Royal College of Physicians

February 2018

These guidelines are produced by the Faculty of Occupational Medicine, which focuses on promoting and supporting health at work, with its mission statement being 'to drive improvement in the health of the working age population'.

<http://www.fom.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Guidance-on-menopause-and-the-workplace-v6.pdf>

Supporting working women through the menopause

Trades Union Congress

November 2013

The TUC 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 Equality Act.

https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUC_menopause_0.pdf

What can employers do to support women going through the menopause?

Example search strategy

Ovid Medline

1. 1. exp Women/
2. 2. wom?n.ti.
3. 3. Female/
4. 4. female*.ti.
5. 5. or/1-4
6. 6. exp Menopause/
7. 7. menopaus*.tw.
8. 8. "change of life".tw.
9. 9. or/7-8
10. 10. exp Workplace/
11. 11. exp Employment/
12. 12. employ*.ti.
13. 13. career*.ti.
14. 14. job.ti.
15. 15. jobs.ti.
16. 16. "working role*".ti.
17. 17. or/10-16
18. 18. 5 and 9 and 17
19. 19. limit 18 to (english language and yr="2009 - Current")

Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria

- workplace interventions
- journal article or report

Exclusion criteria

- foreign language papers

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