



Supporting colleagues experiencing the Menopause

A guide for managers



It's what we do

Introduction

This guide supports our [Menopause Support Policy](#) and is designed to help you assist colleagues who are experiencing the perimenopause or menopause. It includes information about the internal and external support available and offers practical advice on what you can do to assist colleagues going through the menopause.

The menopause is a natural hormone transition that every cisgender woman and some trans men¹, trans women² and non-binary people³ will experience as their body gradually or dramatically stops producing oestrogen. Oestrogen affects every organ in a woman's body which is why there can be so many different symptoms associated with its withdrawal and why everyone's experience is individual to them. Some people will experience almost no symptoms but around 80% do experience changes, and of these, 45% find their symptoms difficult to deal with.⁴ According to [The Merry Menopause](#), the most common symptoms are anxiety, brain fog/reduced concentration and low mood/depression, although over 40 symptoms have so far been recognised as being due to the menopause.

A 2017 survey by the British Menopause Society found that 45% of cisgender⁵ women whose menopausal symptoms had a strong impact on their lives felt the symptoms have had a negative impact on their work. But a 2021 Vodafone survey found that 43% of UK respondents were too embarrassed to ask for support at work and many hid their symptoms due to the stigma still attached to the menopause.

The transition to the menopause may also be impacted by medical interventions such as hysterectomy or illness. There isn't a specific age that people begin to experience the perimenopause, but the average age is 40+, which is around 25% of our workforce.

Why are we talking about the menopause now?

The menopause isn't new; it's always been around. But life expectancy used to be much lower. A hundred years ago people on average experienced the menopause at 57 and died at 59. Today, the average age has lowered, people are generally living longer and often working until their late 60s.



- 1 Trans men are men who were assigned female at birth
- 2 Trans women are women who were assigned male at birth
- 3 Non-binary people are people who feel their gender cannot be defined within the margins of the gender binary: man or woman. Some non-binary people identify as part of the trans community, some do not.
- 4 Unison, The menopause is a workplace issue: guidance and model policy
- 5 Cis gender describes a person whose gender identity is the same as their sex assigned at birth



Why is it a workplace issue?

The menopause affects everyone, whether experiencing it first-hand or second hand as a family member, friend or colleague, sharing information helps to break the taboo.

One third of the cisgender female population are experiencing the perimenopause or menopause at any one time and one in four will or have considered leaving work because of their symptoms⁶.

Trans men will experience a natural menopause if their ovaries remain in place and no hormone therapy is given.

Trans women undertaking hormone therapy will usually remain on this for life and should generally experience limited menopausal-like symptoms. If they choose to have a surgical transition, they will have to come off hormone therapy beforehand and may experience a type of menopause at that point.⁷

Non-binary people who were assigned female at birth and who are not undertaking hormone therapy and whose ovaries remain in place will experience a natural menopause. Non-binary

people who were assigned male at birth and are taking oestrogen may experience a type of menopause if they come off their hormone therapy.

Some trans people may not choose to disclose their trans status and as a result be reluctant to discuss menopausal symptoms that would disclose their trans status.

Wide-ranging physical and psychological symptoms can feel seriously inhibiting to someone in their career. Providing support and communicating openly enables all colleagues to perform at their best.

There are 48 symptoms associated with the menopause. The range, severity and duration will vary from person to person. You can find more information about them all at [The 48 Symptoms of Menopause | GenM \(gen-m.com\)](https://www.gen-m.com/)

⁶ Civil Service HR Menopause at work Employees Sept 2019
⁷ Do Transgender Women Experience Menopause? - HealthyWomen



Our role as the Co-op

Everyone who works at the Co-op will know someone who is experiencing the perimenopause or menopause, whether it's ourselves, our mum, sister, friend, partner or colleague. Alongside the things we already have in place that you will read about here, we are working with GenM to find out how we can support our colleagues more as well as lobbying government to make it a business issue.

Your role as a manager

As a manager you aren't expected to be an expert in the menopause. Your role is to have an awareness so that you can have supportive conversations with colleagues and help them access and signpost to appropriate support.

It's important to understand that each colleague's situation is unique, and their experience and symptoms of the menopause will differ. If you take time to build relationships, have regular informal 1:1's and ask how colleagues are, they will be more likely to open up and talk about changes to their health including the menopause.

Asking colleagues how they are on a regular basis will help to create an open culture and encourage someone to raise any concerns. Building relationships based on trust and respect will make it easier for an employee to raise a health issue like the menopause.

As a manager start by making yourself familiar with the [Menopause Support Policy](#). It can be really daunting talking to someone who has no knowledge of the menopause so the more open, supportive and knowledgeable you are, the less embarrassed colleagues are likely to be to talk about how the menopause is affecting their health and work.

It's important to be aware that many colleagues going through the menopause may choose not to tell their manager about their symptoms and may be reluctant to disclose the real reason for any sickness absence. Sometimes performance and behaviour may change without any clear explanation. If you have concerns about someone's wellbeing or performance, ask general and open questions such as 'How are you?' or 'I noticed you've been late to work recently and I wondered if you're okay?'

It's also important to remember that this is not a one-off event in a colleague's life; symptoms last an average of four years, but for some people can last much longer, so it's important to keep up regular conversations with colleagues. Symptoms can also fluctuate and be felt to varying degrees.

Here is a link to manager training which took place for Co-op managers by The Merry Menopause; [Support through Menopause \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

Approaching a sensitive conversation

Approach conversations with empathy and try not to be embarrassed. It's important to set the right tone when opening a conversation about any sensitive issues. Here are some tips to help you approach a sensitive conversation:

- Make sure you're in a private space
- Allow enough time
- Avoid judgement and making assumptions
- Actively listen and give colleagues space to open up
- Be patient and be prepared for some silences
- Ensure colleagues know they can trust you

Ensure any information a colleague shares with you is treated in confidence and is not shared wider in the team without their consent.

You may find the work adjustment plan [Work Adjustments Form.pdf](#) (ctfassets.net) or wellbeing action plan [Wellbeing-Action-Plan](#) useful tools to help you think about what kind of questions to ask colleagues when you're speaking to them about the menopause.



Practical things you can do to help

Often, a few changes to a colleague's work environment can make a big difference, and discussion with a colleague will help to identify what would help. The table below is not an exhaustive list but provides some examples of adjustments which may be helpful for varying symptoms of the menopause.

Symptom	Potential Adjustments
Psychological symptoms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory problems • Difficulty concentrating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage colleagues to discuss concerns with you • Carry out a wellbeing action plan or work adjustment plan • Reduce demands if workload is identified as an issue. Provide additional time to complete tasks if needed or consider substituting with different tasks • Offer alternative methods of communicating tasks and planning of work to assist memory • Discuss with the colleague whether it would be useful for them to visit their GP if they haven't already • Provide access to Lifeworks
Psychological symptoms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Depression • Panic attacks • Loss of confidence • Mood changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out a wellbeing action plan or work adjustment plan • Allow flexible working where possible Flexible working policy - Co-op Colleagues (coop.co.uk) • Raise general awareness of issues around the menopause within the team so colleagues are more likely to be supportive (do not disclose confidential information unless the colleague is comfortable to do so) • Provide access to Lifeworks • Signpost internal support, e.g, Aspire colleague network and their monthly menopause coffee mornings which offer a safe space to discuss issues and provide support

Symptom	Potential Adjustments
Fatigue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider temporary adjustments to shift patterns or hours when doing the rota, particularly if fatigue is related to sleep disturbance • Reduce physical tasks if possible • Ensure regular breaks
Daytime sweats, hot flushes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure easy access to cold drinking water and toilet facilities • Look at ways to cool the working environment, e.g, provide fans at workstations if possible and open windows and adjust air conditioning • Allow time out and access to fresh air • Ability to order more uniform to be able to change more frequently if needed
Night-time sweats and hot flushes. Insomnia or sleep disturbance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider temporary adjustments to shift patterns or hours when doing the rota • Allow flexible working where possible
Irregular and/or heavy periods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure easy access to toilet facilities • Allow for enough breaks to use the bathroom • Ensure cover is available so colleagues can leave their post if needed • Make it easy to request extra uniform if needed
Skin irritation, dryness or itching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure comfortable working temperatures
Muscular aches and bone and joint pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake a work adjustment form and keep it under review • Consider providing alternative tasks
Dry eyes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out a workstation assessment • Allow extra breaks from screen-based work

In some instances, it may be helpful to seek occupational health advice to consider what adjustments could add value. Contact ER Services on 0330 606 1001 (option 2) for support if you think this may be the case or you need some additional support.



Legal considerations

There are various claims that could be brought for treating menopausal colleagues in the wrong way; these include victimisation, harassment, direct discrimination and indirect discrimination on the grounds of sex, age (because the menopause only affects women, and statistically, older women are far more affected) and/or disability.

Where a colleague is suffering severe symptoms of the menopause (such that their ability to perform day-to-day activities is substantially impaired), this may amount to a disability for the purposes of the Equality Act, which means we have a legal duty to make all reasonable adjustments for the colleague. For more advice contact [ER Services](#).

This means that it is really important for us to treat the menopause sensitively and take it seriously.

Examples:

- Inappropriate comments about women of a certain age and hot flushes could be harassment on the grounds of age, sex and disability.
- Issuing a performance warning to a colleague where the reason for the performance issues is connected to suffering from menopause symptoms could be indirect sex, age and/or disability discrimination.
- Issuing an absence warning to a colleague whose absence was connected to menopause symptoms could be indirect age, sex and/or disability discrimination.
- Failing to allow a menopausal colleague suffering from heavy periods take additional bathroom breaks could be disability discrimination, and also possible indirect age and sex discrimination.



Signposting

As well as a variety of external support, you can contact ER Services for advice. The wellbeing hub [Wellbeing Hub - Home](#) (sharepoint.com) has links to lots of useful information including Lifeworks our EAP, Smart Health and the menopause manager training.

www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause

www.nhs.uk/conditions/early-menopause

Henpicked www.henpicked.net

British Menopause Society www.thebms.org.uk

Menopause matters
www.menopausematters.co.uk

The Daisy Network www.daisynetwork.org.uk

Bupa women's health hub www.bupa.co.uk/womens-health/menopause-support

GenM [GenM | The Menopause Partner for Brands \(gen-m.com\)](http://gen-m.com)

Balance app - A free menopause support app which can be downloaded on the App Store or at Google Play

[Queer / LGBTQIA+ Menopause \(queermenopause.com\)](http://queermenopause.com)

Lisa Health [Lisahealth.com](http://lisahealth.com)

[FREE Menopause Experts Training Education Learn About Your Symptoms](#)

Additional internal support to signpost

"Hot and Sweaty: Breaking Menopause taboos" Yammer group (for those who have access to Yammer)

web.yammer.com/main/groups

Aspire's monthly menopause coffee

mornings - the Aspire colleague network runs free, virtual monthly coffee mornings which offer a safe space to discuss the perimenopause and menopause, whether you are experiencing it yourself or are supporting someone who is. The group is run by colleagues for colleagues and occasionally includes guest expert speakers from the external menopause community. Contact Aspire@coop.co.uk for more information.



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