



# menopause & me

In the workplace

# Contents



What is the menopause?	4
Symptoms of the menopause	5
Long term health problems related to the menopause	6
How can menopause affect work?	7
Treatment options for the menopause	8
What can employers do to help?	9
How has menopause support at work helped?	11

This booklet has been written by Dr Louise Newson, GP and menopause expert in Solihull, West Midlands in collaboration with West Midlands Police and West Midlands Fire Service and developed and funded by Mylan.

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**Menopause Doctor**

The menopause is a normal life event for women and is not an illness or a medical condition. This often means that the symptoms of the menopause are too often under recognised, undervalued and not taken seriously. The psychological symptoms associated with the menopause such as loss of self-confidence, low self-esteem, anxiety and depressive symptoms are the ones that often affect women the most.

### What is the menopause?

The word menopause actually means the last menstrual period. The menopause occurs when a woman's ovaries stop producing eggs and as a result the levels of the hormones called oestrogen and progesterone fall.

A woman is referred to as being menopausal when her last menstrual period was at least one year ago. The term perimenopause is often used as this is the time a woman experiences menopausal symptoms but is still having periods.

The hormones oestrogen and progesterone work together to regulate the menstrual cycle and also the production of eggs. During the perimenopause and menopause the levels of these hormones fluctuate greatly and it is often the imbalance of these hormones which leads to symptoms of the menopause occurring. Oestrogen protects a number of different systems in the body including; the brain, skin, bones, heart and vagina so low levels can affect all these parts of a woman's body.

The average age of the menopause in the UK is 51 years, however this can be earlier for some women. Symptoms of the perimenopause often start at around 45 years of age. If the menopause occurs before the age of 40 it is usually classed as Premature Ovarian Insufficiency (POI).

Although the menopause is a normal event in a woman's life, certain conditions can bring about an early menopause. These include having the ovaries removed during an operation. Some types of radiotherapy or chemotherapy drugs that treat cancer can lead to an early menopause occurring.

#### Did you know?

Around one in ten women give up work due to their menopause

#### Definitions

**Pre-menopause** – the time in a woman's life before any symptoms occur

**Perimenopause** – the time when a woman experiences menopausal symptoms but before her periods have stopped

**Post-menopause** – the time in life after the menopause

### Symptoms of the menopause

Every woman will go through the menopause at some stage in their lives. Around one in four women have no problems or symptoms. However, this means that the majority of women experience symptoms that can affect their lives both at home and also at work.

Menopausal symptoms vary tremendously between women. Some will only experience them for a few months, whilst others can continue to suffer with symptoms for many years, even decades.

Symptoms of the menopause can often have a very negative effect on a woman's partner, family and also work colleagues. It can be common for symptoms to come and go so many women have some months where they feel completely normal and then other times when they experience unpleasant symptoms which adversely affect the quality of their life.

The most common symptoms that are associated with the menopause are hot flushes and night sweats. These are often referred to as the vasomotor symptoms of the menopause. Hot flushes can be associated with symptoms such as sweating, dizziness, light-headedness and even heart palpitations.

Although these can affect a woman's ability to work, it is often the psychological symptoms of the menopause that affect their ability at work the most. Poor concentration, tiredness, poor memory, depression, feeling low, reduced confidence and sleeplessness are all contributing factors. Many women find that their brain does not feel as engaged as much as it used to.

Other symptoms such as mood swings, panic attacks, irritability and reduced ability to multi-task can all negatively affect a woman's performance at work.

Some women experience other physical symptoms such as worsening headaches and migraines, joint pains and heavy periods which can also lead to time off work.

In addition, perhaps more worryingly, it has been estimated that around 10% of women actually stop work altogether because of their severe menopausal symptoms.

#### Did you know?

80% of women experience several symptoms of the menopause



## Long term health problems which can arise from the menopause

Even though the menopause is a natural part of a woman's life, the menopause can actually cause physical changes that can negatively affect a woman's future health. This means that the risk of certain conditions can increase which can lead to health problems affecting work in the future.

### Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a condition that weakens bones, making them fragile and more oestrogen helps to keep bones strong and healthy. During the menopause, the loss of bone density (strength) occurs at a faster rate than bone buildup, which then results in a gradual loss of bone mass. Once this loss of bone reaches a certain point, a person has osteoporosis. This occurs as a result of the lower oestrogen levels.

People with osteoporosis have an increased risk of fractures occurring even with little or no trauma. This can mean that normal stresses on the bones from sitting, standing, coughing or even hugging can result in painful fractures. These fractures can occur in any of the bones, including the spine, hips and wrists.

### Cardiovascular Disease

This means diseases of the heart and blood vessels, so includes heart attacks and strokes. Oestrogen is very important at keeping the blood vessels healthy as it seems to have a positive effect on the inner layer the walls of the blood vessels. With low levels of oestrogen, the future risk of cardiovascular disease increases after the menopause.

Other changes in the cardiovascular system can take place, such as negative changes in blood pressure and cholesterol. There is also an increased risk of diabetes occurring after the menopause.

### Did you know?

Women lose bone tissue more rapidly than men after the menopause

## How can menopause affect work?

Around 3.5 million women aged over 50 years are currently in employment in the UK. The employment rate for women in the UK has actually increased in the past few decades and women now represent nearly a half of the UK labour force. This means that the menopause now affects more woman at work than it has in the past.

The retirement age is increasing and elderly people are far more active, both physically and mentally, than they were in the past. Symptoms of the menopause last far longer than most women anticipate, the average length of time is four years and many women still have some symptoms for longer than ten years.

The menopause can often occur at an important time in a woman's career and many women do not recognise that their symptoms are related to their hormone levels changing. They often put these symptoms down to stresses at work and / or at home which can clearly contribute to their symptoms but this might not be the whole picture.

As many women still do not recognise that it is the menopause (or perimenopause) causing their symptoms, they may not talk about it and more importantly they may not ask for help. In addition, if their colleagues do not know enough about the menopause, then it may be very hard for women to talk about symptoms they are experiencing at work.

Research has shown that the more frequently women reported experiencing menopause-related symptoms and the more bothersome the symptoms were, the less engaged they felt at work, less satisfied with their job, the greater their intention to quit their job and the lower their commitment to their employment.

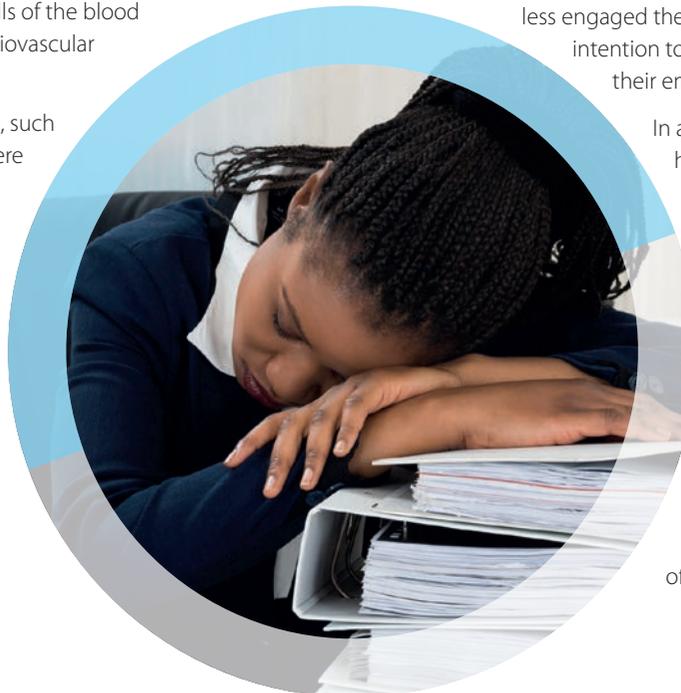
In addition, studies have shown that menopausal symptoms can have a significant impact on attendance and performance in the workplace, with some women being misdiagnosed as suffering from mental ill-health or other conditions, and the impact on their work can be wrongly identified as a performance issue.

Menopausal symptoms can also contribute to women deciding to leave their jobs early, or not putting themselves forward for specialist posts or promotion, thus affecting the diversity of teams within their organisations.

Nevertheless, it is important that a woman's menopausal status is not an automatic indicator of her likely perceptions of work or of her performance in the workplace.

### Did you know?

Around half of women have been reported as finding work difficult due to their symptoms of menopause



## Treatment options for menopause

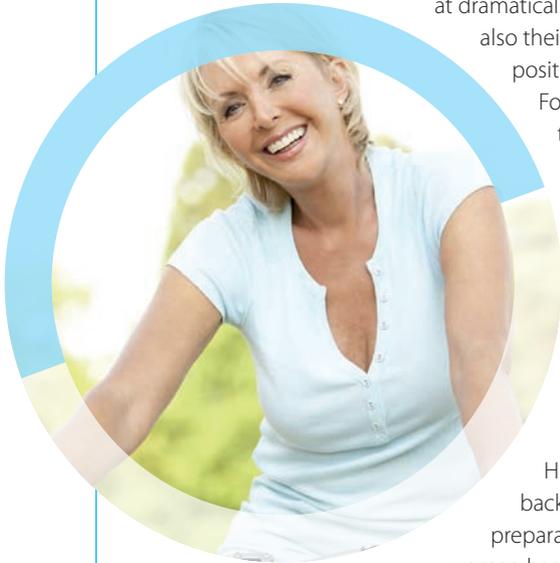
There are various treatments available that can really help symptoms of the menopause and also future health. Women should be encouraged to have a healthy lifestyle and should give up smoking and reduce their alcohol intake, if appropriate. Eating a balanced diet and having regular exercise is very important.

The Faculty of Occupational Medicine (FOM) guidance also recommends that women seek advice regarding available treatment from their GPs. Many women do not realise how effective hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can be at dramatically improving both their symptoms and also their quality of life which can then have the positive effect of functioning better at work.

For the majority of women under 60 years the benefits of HRT outweigh any risks. In addition, HRT is also recommended for young women to take following an early menopause and they need to take it until they are at least 51 years old.

HRT is the most effective treatment available to improve menopause symptoms. Many women find that all their symptoms of the menopause improve within a few months of taking HRT and feel that they have their "old life" back again. There are many different types and preparations of HRT and it is important that each woman has individualised treatment from their doctor.

In addition, HRT can reduce future risk of osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease. There are some small risks for some women who take HRT. The risk of breast cancer is the one that worries most women. Studies have shown that women who take oestrogen only HRT do not have an increased risk of breast cancer. Taking combined (oestrogen and progestogen) HRT may be associated with a small increased risk of developing breast cancer. This risk is actually less than the risk of breast cancer in women who are obese and also those women who drink two to three units of alcohol each day.



## What can employers do to help?

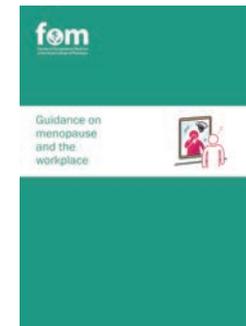
When menopause is managed correctly it can reduce absenteeism and also enable women to talk about their concerns with their work colleagues and managers. There should be measures in place to provide support for these women.

Employers have responsibilities for the health and safety of all their employees, but there are also clear business reasons for proactively managing an age-diverse workforce. Employers should consider supporting menopausal women as part of a holistic approach to employee health and well-being. This might include risk assessments to make suitable adjustments to the physical and psychological work environment, provision of information and support, and training for line managers.

In November 2016, the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (FOM) introduced new guidelines for women entitled "Guidance on menopause and the workplace". These practical guidelines aim to help women experiencing troublesome menopausal symptoms, and to support them and their colleagues and managers in tackling the occupational aspects of menopausal symptoms. These should be used as a guide for both employees and employers.

The guidelines provide clear recommendations about working conditions for menopausal women. They advocate introducing training in the workplace to increase awareness of the potential effects of menopause in the workplace, adapting the workplace environment where appropriate (for example changing temperature of rooms and having fans available), making flexible hours for some women an option and perhaps most importantly, creating opportunities to facilitate discussion about symptoms that are impacting on their ability to work.

However, it is also important to understand and acknowledge that some women will not want to talk to their line managers about their symptoms and this decision needs to be respected.



## Interventions that West Midlands Police have found beneficial:

- **Supervisor briefings** – Workshops (delivered by Laughology) with a humorous approach help people understand the issues and what they can do to support. The use of humour makes the sessions enjoyable as well as informative, and colleagues have left them talking positively and recommending other colleagues to attend.
- **Menopause forum** – Opportunity for women to meet with others to share experiences, exchange suggestions to help and discuss ways to raise issues for the force to consider. This group has face-to-face meetings and also virtual support and social media forums to enable those who cannot be released from work to still be involved. This has made a massive difference to feeling supported in the workplace.
- **Website and Occupational Health support** – Details and signposting on intranet site, providing information, medical advice and links to websites. This has helped men and women as they have recognised that partners can be significantly affected as well as women themselves.
- **Webchat and FAQ** – This is an opportunity for medical knowledge to be shared through an online facility and common questions provided with expert advice from a medical doctor who is experienced in managing the menopause.
- **Reasonable adjustment passport (RAP)** – This is a similar to process used for adjustments for disabilities, the RAP has been adopted and used by the occupational health department to support women in the workplace, without them having to explain symptoms and the considerations they need every time they change their post or change their supervisor.

West Midlands police has taken a positive stand around improving the well-being of all their employees. Whilst their work around menopause has allowed women to feel more confident to talk about their experience and feel more supported, it has also had a positive impact on the rest of their colleagues. Showing understanding and consideration has enabled many women to continue to work instead of taking sick leave.



## How has menopause support at work helped?

*“We CAN change the way we deal with the change – that was living proof in the session today.”*

*“I attend the menopause support group and what a fabulous group of ladies they are. It’s the first time I’ve felt that everything has fallen into place for me.”*

*“I now know that I am not alone and feel that everything makes sense. I came out of the meeting with hope, even if I was emotional.”*

*“I just wanted to pass on my thanks to the force for allowing this menopause group to form.”*

*“Just a couple of hours was enough to engage and embrace everything from basics to brainstorming how life can be made better in the workplace.”*

*“It is so rewarding to see the work being pioneered at West Midlands Police and the genuine enjoyment and desire of all those who attended to make the session count.”*

## **Reporting of side effects**

If you get any side effects, talk to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. This includes any possible side effects not listed in the package leaflet. You can also report side effects directly via the Yellow Card Scheme at [www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard](http://www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard).

By reporting side effects, you can help provide more information on the safety of these medicines.

Useful links:

**Faculty of Occupational Medicine**

**Menopause Doctor**

**Menopause Matters**

**The Daisy Network**

**Women's Health Concern**

Please note Mylan has had no involvement in any of the websites listed above.

