MENOPAUSE

MENOPAUSE AND WORK – UNDERSTANDING NEW GUIDELINES

Around 3.5 million women work during the menopause, meaning employers have a significant responsibility for women’s health and wellbeing. This article provides an overview of the employer’s duty and the role of the GP during the menopause.

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Menopause is a normal life event for women, so it is not an illness or a medical condition. Although most symptoms of the perimenopause or menopause are not life-threatening, they can often have a negative impact on the quality of life and the physical and mental health of women. The symptoms of the menopause are often under recognised, undervalued and not taken seriously.

Menopausal and perimenopausal symptoms vary tremendously between women. The most common symptoms are the vasomotor symptoms (hot flushes and night sweats). Other symptoms include mood changes, memory and concentration loss, urogenital atrophy, a lack of interest in sex, headaches and joint and muscle stiffness.

The symptoms of the menopause can be non-existent, last for a few years or, in some cases, last for many decades. Around 80% of menopausal women experience symptoms and around 25% of women experience severe symptoms.

The psychological symptoms associated with the menopause such as loss of self-confidence, low self-esteem, anxiety and depressive symptoms are the ones that usually have the largest negative impact on women.

On average, women spend nearly a third of their life being postmenopausal. The retirement age is increasing and elderly people are far more physically and mentally active than they were in the past.

Scale of the problem

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 half of the UK labour force. This means that many more women are affected by symptoms of their menopause, often to the detriment of their families, work, and life in general. With a quarter of women experiencing severe symptoms, it means the menopause can have a significant impact on the individual, and also their work colleagues.

As many women still do not recognise that it is the menopause (or perimenopause) causing their symptoms, they will not talk about it or ask for help.

In addition, if their colleagues do not know enough about the menopause, then it potentially makes it very hard for women to talk about the symptoms they are experiencing at work.

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Impact of menopause on work

It is no surprise that around half of women have been reported as finding work difficult due to their symptoms of menopause. Poor concentration, tiredness, poor memory, depression, feeling low, lowered confidence and particularly hot flushes are all cited as contributing factors. In addition – and perhaps more worryingly – it has been estimated that around 10% of women actually stop work altogether because of their severe menopausal symptoms.

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.

Studies have shown that menopause 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. A study commissioned by the British Association of Women in Policing found that some women police officers reported that the tiredness and insomnia they associated with menopausal transition affected their capacity to function normally at work.

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

**Addressing the problem**

It is likely that early diagnosis, education and adjustments can act as a preventative measure for menopause related sickness from work. When menopause is managed correctly it reduces absenteeism (for example, reasonable adjustments being put in place) and enables women to talk about their concerns with their work colleagues and managers. There should be measures in place to provide some support in what is considered a significant physical change, in line with puberty or pregnancy.

Employers have responsibilities for the health and safety of all their employees, regardless of the underlying condition. There are also clear business reasons for proactively managing an age-diverse workforce. Some employers have been slow to recognise that women of menopausal age may need specific considerations, and many employers do not yet have clear processes to support women coping with menopausal symptoms. Recommendations from research in this area are for employers to best support menopausal women as part of a holistic approach to employee health and well-being, include risk assessments to make suitable adjustments to the physical and psychosocial work environment, provision of information and support, and training for line managers. Currently, companies vary with respect to their policies to help menopausal women at work.

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West Midlands Police has taken a positive stand to improve the wellbeing of all their employees, especially with respect to the menopause. Their work around the menopause has allowed women to feel confident of talking about their experience, thus feeling more supported. In addition, it has 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. One example of how they have helped is introducing a reasonable adjustment passport (RAP) for the menopause. This is similar to a process used for adjustments for disabilities and it has been adopted and used by the occupational health department to support menopausal 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.

**New guidelines addressing the menopause in the workplace**

In November 2016, the Faculty of Occupational Medicine 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.

The guidelines provide clear recommendations about working conditions for menopausal women, and are based on the guidelines produced by the European Menopause and Andropause Society (EMAS). These recommendations include advocating for workplace training 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 creating opportunities to facilitate discussion about symptoms that are impacting on the ability to work.

There is also clear guidance for women whose menopausal symptoms are affecting them at work. The recommendations include encouraging discussions to take place with managers about practical needs, speaking with the occupational health service and also talking with other colleagues. Advice regarding healthy lifestyle and wellbeing is also mentioned, which are clearly very important when considering the management of the menopause.

**What can GPs and healthcare professionals do to help?**

The guidance recommends that women should seek advice regarding available treatment from their GPs. Many women are still suffering in silence and do not realise how effective hormone replacement therapy can be at dramatically improving their symptoms and their quality of life, including helping them function better at work.

The benefits and risks of HRT vary by dosage, regimen, and timing of initiation. Data accumulated from numerous studies have shown that, in women under 60 years of age with symptoms or other indications, initiating HRT near their menopause provides a favourable benefit-risk ratio. This has been reiterated in the NICE and IMS guidance. The NICE guidelines on the diagnosis and management of the menopause were published in November 2015 and should be encouraging for many healthcare professionals. They should serve to empower clinicians with more knowledge and confidence to diagnose and manage the menopause. They provide clear statements regarding benefits and risks of HRT.
Benefits of HRT

HRT works really well at improving symptoms, including the psychological effects of the menopause. Oestrogens are the most effective way of increasing bone mineral density and also preventing osteoporotic fractures in women. Consistent evidence from both randomised and cohort studies has demonstrated that the risk of any fragility fracture and non-vertebral fracture is significantly lower for women currently taking HRT (either oestrogen alone or for the combination of oestrogen plus progestogen) compared with non-users. In the past there has been some concern about the association of cardiovascular disease (CVD) and HRT. However, giving HRT to women early (less than 10 years since their menopause) has been shown to have a significant reduction in all cause of death and a 50% reduction in risk of death from coronary heart disease. A recent large Finnish study has shown that using any HRT for at least 10 years is associated with 19 fewer CHD deaths and seven fewer stroke deaths per 1,000 women. For secondary prevention of CVD there has not shown to be any increased risk of myocardial infarction or of death (either all-cause or from CVD causes).

It is important to note that the presence of cardiovascular risk factors (such as hypertension) is not a contra-indication to HRT, provided any risk factors are optimally managed.

Summary

Women need to be made aware of the potential benefits they may gain from taking HRT, in terms of their future symptoms and also their future health. Having the right type and dose of HRT can really help women to function better; both at home and at work. HRT is generally a safe, effective treatment of the menopause, and as such should be considered for many more women than it has been in the recent past.

It is really important that patients are given the time they need and also the information they require to make informed choices regarding their menopause and its management. Many women still feel helpless and despondent when they discuss their menopausal symptoms with their GPs and this needs to change.

References

4. Griffiths A, Cox S et al. Bordon: British Association of Women in Policing, 2006. ohaw.co/1ccYg9s
5. Griffiths A, MacLennan SJ, Hassard J. Maturitas 2013 155–159

BOOK REVIEW – DR LOUISE NEWSON

**Women’s Health in Primary Care.**


Women’s health is very important for all healthcare professionals regardless of their area of special interest. Even male GPs with little interest in this field of medicine cannot ignore the importance of optimising women’s health at all ages.

This book has been divided into numerous chapters, all written by well-respected experts. The information in this book is very easy to read with numerous cases, which helps to focus the mind and make the information seem more relevant to clinical practice. At the beginning of each chapter there is a really useful table of key points summarising the information.

The topics chosen for the chapters are very comprehensive and include contraception, Premature Ovarian Insufficiency, endometriosis, continence problems, menopause and osteoporosis. In addition, some of the issues frequently seen but not commonly written about are included, such as adolescent gynaecology, maternity problems and breast disease. All the information is really well-referenced and any relevant guidelines are also included and referred to.

I feel that every general practice should consider purchasing this book to have as a ready reference guide. GPs, practice nurses and students will all benefit from having easy access to this book. In the short time I have had this book my knowledge has already improved significantly which will definitely benefit my patients!