

Menopause in the workplace

Introduction

The majority of women experience some or all of the symptoms of the menopause at some point in their lives, usually between the ages of 45 and 55. Various studies have shown that experiencing the menopause and associated symptoms can have a major impact in and on the workplace. The education sector is predominantly made up of women. Supporting everyone working in schools whilst they are going through the menopause, needs to be a priority for every school.

Despite the numbers of people going through the menopause in the education sector, it is rarely discussed and many people have no awareness of what's involved. This has led many women to hide symptoms and to avoid asking for help. Menopause is not just an age or gender issue - it can affect staff directly or indirectly, and it should be considered an organisational wide equality issue.

This resource will explain:

- What is the menopause?
- What are the symptoms?
- How to look after yourself if your experiencing menopause
- How to look out for colleagues
- What school leaders can do to support staff effectively



What is the menopause?

The menopause is a natural part of ageing that usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age due to a change in the balance of the body's hormones. It can also happen earlier for unknown reasons or due to other medical factors e.g. if women's ovaries have been damaged by treatment for cancer or they are having treatment for infertility or conditions such as endometriosis. There is also a stage called the perimenopause which is a period of hormonal change leading up to the menopause that can last up to five years and also has a variety of symptoms. Many people and employers are unaware of the different types and stages of menopause, which means they do not associate symptoms with it. This in turn can act as a barrier to providing or accessing support.

Whatever type of menopause (natural, premature, surgical / medical, or menopause symptoms for other reasons) is being experienced, it's essential that both the physical and emotional impacts and effects are understood and considered when putting in place appropriate support in school settings.

Some women experience relatively few symptoms while others experience such severe symptoms that it impacts negatively on both their home and working lives. It is important to remember that the menopause affects every woman differently and that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to supporting all staff effectively. Despite this, a compassionate and open minded approach which involves listening to what colleagues need to navigate this major life event, will go a long way to ensuring that schools provide supportive and constructive environments for their staff as they experience the menopause.







Why is this important in schools?

Have you ever wondered why there aren't as many female educators over the age of 55, why talented school staff can suddenly start to struggle, or why a school's sickness absence can creep up without explanation? You may want to think about the menopause at work. According to the **Government's Report on Menopause and the Effects of Women's Economic Participation:**

- Menopausal women are the **fastest growing demographic in the workforce**
- Nearly **8 out of 10** of menopausal women are in work
- **3 out of 4 women** experience symptoms, 1 in 4 could experience serious symptoms

NEU research found that:

-  **50+** Women aged over 50 do not feel valued in the school/college environment
-  Women are reluctant to disclose their menopausal status to a line manager
-  Women do not request reasonable adjustments and when they do they are often rejected
-  Some women feel that they are subject to detrimental treatment in the workplace because of menopausal symptoms.

There are significant numbers of women in the age bracket which means the menopause can occur for staff in all roles - teachers, teaching assistants, school leaders, as well as technical, administrative, catering and cleaning staff.

For people not experiencing the menopause, the chances are they are working with someone who is or has.



Why the menopause matters in schools

Survey findings from the education sector have shown that a quarter of women going through the menopause have considered leaving their jobs. Schools cannot afford to lose this experienced, highly skilled and capable group of educators.

Normalising conversations about the menopause will enable people to ask for help if they need it - with reasonable adjustments and support women will be far more likely to stay happy and healthy at work whilst going through the menopause.

Supporting women through the menopause will increase collegiate bonds, and promote a happier, healthier workplace culture for all.

Schools need to keep the teachers affected by menopause! Their skills and expertise are valuable and schools will have invested in them.

The menopause is now being taught to students too - so everyone in a school needs to have greater awareness of the menopause.

Proactively managing any menopause related sickness absence or changes in performance helps schools plan cover more effectively.

Once women have gone through the menopause they report feeling more authentic, assertive and confident which are all great qualities to have in the class or staff room.

Conversations about the menopause will make other conversations easier for colleagues too e.g. those experiencing menstrual or fertility issues, or broader physical and mental health issues. The more supportive and safe a workplace, the more likely teachers and other staff will be able to continue to perform well for **students**.







Managing the demands of being an educator whilst experiencing the menopause can be very challenging.







The symptoms can have a huge emotional and physical impact on women, as well as affecting performance, retention, workplace culture, staff effectiveness and attendance. It is essential that the menopause is recognised as both an equality and occupational health issue across schools. Leaders and managers must be aware of their responsibilities.

Signs and symptoms - how the menopause affects different people


Everyone's experience of the menopause is different and the most important thing managers need to do is to listen to the individual. However, whilst not everyone feels comfortable disclosing symptoms of the menopause within schools, it is essential that school managers, leaders and other staff, have a proactive and good understanding of the menopause.

Signs and symptoms that may be noticeable within school include:

-  Changes in mood or regular low mood
-  Poor memory and concentration (can lead to loss of confidence and effectiveness) and also referred to as 'brain fog'
-  Low energy, fatigue and exhaustion (caused by insomnia and sleep disturbance)
-  Headaches and joint aches or pains

-  Hot flushes
-  Anxiety or panic attacks
-  Increased, unexplained bathroom breaks (potentially to manage painful, irregular and heavy periods) and regular changes of clothes
-  Sudden weight gain
-  Increased, unexplained absences
-  Worsening of existing health conditions and associated symptoms e.g. arthritis, skin conditions, mental health problems

Please note, this is not an exhaustive list. Symptoms can be physical and mental, and can vary in severity, variety and length. Symptoms can begin months or years before a woman's periods stop and **3% of women have symptoms for the rest of their lives.**

 You can read more about how the menopause affects different people, including those who are older, LGBT+, or who have a disability, people of colour and trans educators, [here](#).



Going through the menopause whilst working in a school



Although individuals go through the menopause, it's an employer's responsibility to accommodate any adjustments required to make that life process easier for you. A supportive school environment can make a massive difference to how you experience the menopause but we know that not everyone has access to this kind of workplace culture.

Here are some tips to help navigate the menopause in schools:

- Find out as much as you can about the menopause — empower yourself with the facts.
- Talk about it with whoever you feel comfortable doing so - family, friends and colleagues. It's likely you'll know people who have experienced or are experiencing similar things.
- Remember it's not all on you - don't try to cope with everything alone or assume that working longer hours will help - it won't and you're more likely to crash.
- Be kind to yourself and look after yourself - eat well, exercise and find time to do things that make you happy. More on this [here](#).
- Try not to be ashamed, think it's your fault or beat yourself up for experiencing a natural process.
- Remember that symptoms will pass — you won't feel like this forever.
- If you feel able to, ask your manager or workplace for support. Explain that you are experiencing menopausal changes, find out what support is available and what reasonable adjustments can be made.
- Contact your union - they will have support and advice available, for example this [NEU menopause in the workplace toolkit](#).

If you feel unsupported or discriminated against, or feel like you need more help than you are currently getting, it is important you reach out to find support. You don't have to struggle on your own. You can find other sources of support at the end of this document and you can also talk to your union representatives.

Supporting a colleague experiencing the menopause:

Observing some of the symptoms or signs that indicate someone in your team may be experiencing the menopause doesn't mean they definitely are. If you think a colleague might be experiencing the menopause, the most important things to remember are:

Be supportive - offer non-judgemental support that you are able to follow through on

Listen to the person - everyone experiences the menopause differently. Listening to individual experiences is essential to being able to support someone properly.



Signpost to support - schools may have menopause policies or support and adjustments already in place. If you know of these, point colleagues to them. People can also be signposted to other sources of support (see section at the end of this document).

Be open - if you have experienced the menopause already, or other health related issues that are often not discussed, try to help normalise these types of conversations so people feel safer if they do want to speak out or ask for help.

Don't assume everyone will want or need help - the menopause is a natural stage of life for women — and anyone born female.

These tips are for all colleagues and staff. School leaders and managers have a much bigger role to play in ensuring the menopause is rightly approached as a workplace equality and occupational health issue.

How managers can support individuals:

All managers need to know about the menopause, and how they can support their staff. Managers should also be aware of the indirect effects of the menopause on people such as spouses, significant others, and close family members or friends of individuals going through the menopause.



If your school has a policy which covers guidance for managers on the menopause, make sure you know the policy and any support available so you can signpost staff to this. If your school doesn't have this, you can still provide appropriate support to anyone you manage.

Remember that everyone is different and each person may need something slightly different. If someone talks to you about the menopause you could ask the following questions to find out more and agree ways to support them:

- What do you need?
- What is making this harder for you?
- How can we remove or lower some of the hurdles?
- How can we support you?

Other ways you may be able to support staff include:

- Consider and remind them of their strengths and try to remove any significant hurdles they are experiencing in the short term.
- Gently and without judgement or blame, offer an occupational therapy assessment.
- Listening and encouraging them to speak with you. Don't reference performance or capability procedures - this will only increase anxiety and stress levels.
- Create an open culture in your team that celebrates difference and includes everyone. Encourage discussion and have information about menopause readily available and visible.
- Be aware of how the menopause might impact on appraisal or pay progression for teachers; consider adjusting objectives to take account of menopause-related absence or where menopause symptoms may have affected performance.
- Educate yourself on the menopause, and the reasonable adjustments potentially required, and initiate conversations with staff about this.

What school leaders should do

All employers must minimise or remove workplace health and safety risks. This includes making sure menopausal symptoms are not made worse by the workplace or its work practices. Making changes to help a worker manage their symptoms when doing their job is vital. It is also worth noting that menopausal symptoms have been accepted at employment tribunals as a disability.

It's not always easy for managers or school leaders to know the extent to which the menopause is affecting staff or the school, because people often don't feel comfortable talking about it. Normalising conversation about the menopause and creating a culture where it can be discussed is an important first step that school leaders need to take. Awareness on this topic is fundamental and reducing the stigma attached to it is vital.

Changes and initiatives that are needed range from more strategic, large-scale actions, to simple, practical things that can make a big difference to people experiencing menopause symptoms.

Change and improve school culture - make the menopause a whole school issue:

- Talk about it! Raise awareness about menopause, bust the myths, and make it everybody's business. The goal should be to create a menopause friendly workplace where women feel comfortable talking about how it's affecting them and where they are able to ask for advice and support.
- School leaders should make their aims clear regarding creating a menopause-aware school.
- Challenge negative menopause stereotypes and stigma around the menopause.
- Demonstrate support for those going through the menopause by supporting requests for counselling or other emotional support, or encouraging the formation of workplace support groups.
- Make this part of a wider drive to ensure your school is inclusive for all and age friendly. Many workers are expecting to remain in employment through their 60s and beyond. Career support and training improves staff engagement and retention at any age.
- Create an environment where reasonable adjustments are made to achieve a comfortable working environment for all.



Get policies right:

- Write and implement a policy that takes account of the menopause. This could be a health and safety policy that considers gendered or age-related issues, or a specific menopause policy. Whatever you create should follow the same consultation process as any other policy. The policy should state what support is available for staff and provide simple guidance for managers and team leaders.
- Have champions across the school for this policy who make sure staff are aware of it. Have a senior leader championing it too.
- Ensure that any health and safety, sickness absence, performance management, equality and diversity, and occupational health policies link to and fit with the menopause policy.
- Ensure that school risk assessments take account of the needs of anyone experiencing menopause and that adjustments effectively remove or control risks.
- Identify adjustments that can be made for all workers as well as individual reasonable adjustments (see below) and include these in policies.

Improve awareness and understanding:

- Run training and awareness raising sessions regarding the menopause across your school. Can you include it in CPD? Make sure senior school leaders are visibly improving their own knowledge and awareness.
- Provide points of contact who are available for women to go to for menopause related advice.

Appropriate absence and performance management:

- Manage absence monitoring in a supportive and constructive way which recognises that the menopause is a long-term and fluctuating health change.
- Be aware of how the menopause might impact on appraisal or pay progression for teachers; consider adjusting objectives to take account of menopause-related absence or where menopause symptoms may have affected performance.
- Avoid detrimental treatment related to menopause and be supportive of women who are absent for menopause-related reasons, adjusting absence-monitoring arrangements to minimise stress.

A risk assessment for the perimenopause and menopause should include at a minimum:

- Temperature and ventilation in the workplace
- Whether there is somewhere suitable for the employee to rest
- Availability and accessibility of toilet and washroom facilities
- Availability of cold drinking water
- Ability and willingness to make changes to help the staff member to work, and minimise, reduce or remove any dips in their job performance due to symptoms
- A commitment to review the assessment in a timely fashion.





Examples of practical reasonable adjustments that can be made for people experiencing the menopause

Working patterns:

Wherever possible, flexibility is needed and staff requests for flexibility should be upheld. The following can be implemented (including using a whole school approach) to aid this:

- Enable people to undertake non-contact times at home or off site - sometimes just five minutes for walking and fresh air can help to reset.
- Make sure women can have breaks to get to the toilet if they need to. The frequency of these breaks is likely to increase during the menopause. This might be most easily managed as part of a whole school policy for workers to take toilet breaks during lesson time.
- Ensure people can have time to attend medical appointments.
- Consider timetable adjustments to help take the pressure off e.g. perhaps you don't want to give someone the most difficult class at the time of day when they're the most exhausted or experiencing brain fog.
- Consider changing tasks or hours for staff on a temporary basis whilst symptoms are managed, or consider possible job alternatives where needed.



Working environment - ensure there is easy and ready access to:

- Cold drinking water
- Toilets, washing and showering facilities which also provide sanitary products
- Adjustable temperature control in classrooms and break rooms
- Space to store sanitary products and changes of clothes in secure areas
- Fans if necessary
- Windows that you can open and shut
- Calm and quiet rest / break room spaces for staff

Other workplace considerations - make sure that the following are menopause friendly:

- Temperature management systems
- Dress codes or policies
- Stress management initiatives - it's been shown that stress makes menopausal symptoms worse. It may be appropriate to set up support groups, or help arrange counselling or coaching.

Please note this is not an exhaustive list but definitely a good place to start!








Listening to staff and colleagues who are experiencing the menopause and responding accordingly will go a long way to ensuring your school is menopause aware and friendly.



*Click here for a comprehensive guide to addressing the symptoms of the menopause through different, school appropriate, adjustments. Find the section **Addressing workplace issues.***

More information and support for individuals and schools



-  **NHS information about the menopause** - covers an overview, symptoms and treatment options
-  **The NEU Working through the menopause toolkit** - includes lots of information for individuals, posters for schools, conversation starters, menopause policy templates and a leadership checklist for senior leadership teams to ensure your school is supporting women working through the menopause.
-  Acas's **Menopause at work guidance** - designed to help employers and managers support their staff, includes tips for workers on how to raise any concerns and good practice guidance for employers to help manage menopause at work.
-  **Education Support blog** - covers the stories of other teachers and educators experiencing the menopause and what they found helpful (or not) in schools
-  CIPD's **Let's talk menopause' resource** - provides managers with tools on how to effectively support women going through the menopause at work.
-  **NASUWT template menopause policy** - can be adapted by all schools.
-  **Menopause Charity UK** - provide support, education and awareness and campaigning for people experiencing the menopause

Sources:

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