

**HOW**

**ACTION FOR CHILDREN**

**WORKS**

# **Let's talk about the menopause**

**A guide to supporting  
women in the workplace**



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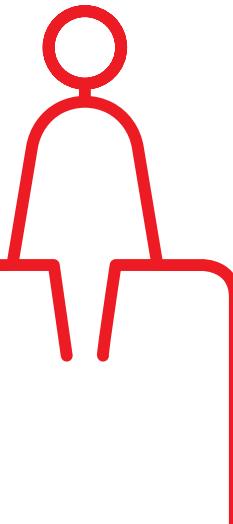
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# Introduction

Roughly half of UK workers are women, all of whom will experience the menopause. There are currently 3.5 million women workers over the age of 50 in the UK, which is almost half (45%) of the over-50 workforce. (Office of National Statistics, 2010.) Although it is rarely discussed at work, the menopause is a natural stage of life that millions of women workers are either going through now or will experience in the future. The menopause is marked by changes in the hormones and the ending of menstruation (when a woman's periods stop for 12 consecutive months).

For most women it happens between the ages of 45 and 55, although a minority of women experience it in their 30s or earlier. In the UK the average age for a woman to reach the menopause is 52. During the period before the menopause (perimenopause) these changes lead to menstrual irregularities. Symptoms associated with the menopause include hot flushes, palpitations, night sweats and sleep disturbance, fatigue, poor concentration, irritability, mood disturbance, skin irritation and dryness. Overall, this period of hormonal change and associated symptoms can last from four to eight years.

The menopause can lead to changes in a women's health and may also lead to emotional changes. These can affect how a woman does her work and her relationship with her colleagues. Unfortunately, there can be little understanding of the issues and little support for women who are going through the menopause. Action for Children recognises that women of menopausal age may need special consideration and that the menopause is not simply a private matter. We need to be able to openly discuss the menopause, what it is and the impact it has on women. The menopause is an occupational health issue, and one that is growing in importance. It is important managers raise the issue in the workplace and are aware of their responsibilities to ensure that conditions in the workplace can make menopausal symptoms worse. Women who are experiencing the menopause also need to know that there is someone they can go to and discuss any difficulties they are having.



# What happens when you go through the menopause

The changes associated with the menopause begin before a woman's periods stop. Some women experience almost no symptoms, but around 80% do experience noticeable changes and of these, 45% find their symptoms difficult to deal with. The most common symptoms are hot flushes, night sweats and irritability. Without treatment, most menopausal symptoms gradually stop naturally.

Most women with symptoms have at least two or three years of 'hormonal chaos' as their oestrogen levels decline before the last period, although for some this can go on for five or more years. This is called the perimenopause. During this time menstrual periods become less frequent, the odd period is missed and then they stop altogether. Women are said to be postmenopausal any time after their last period. However, a small minority still have hot flushes in their eighties.

Every woman's experience of the menopause will be different but some of the most common symptoms that women may experience are:

**Hot flushes**, which can start in the face, neck or chest, before spreading upwards and downwards. At night they are felt as night sweats. Most flushes only last a few minutes and the woman may sweat and the face, neck and chest become red and patchy. The heart rate can also become quicker or stronger.

**Sleep disturbance**, sometimes caused by night sweats although it can also be caused by the anxiety women feel during the menopause. Sleep loss can cause irritability or lack of concentration at work. The menopause may also be linked to increased anxiety or depression.

**Urinary problems**, many women have recurrent lower urinary tract infections, such as cystitis. It is common to have an urgent need to pass urine or a need to pass it more often than normal.

**Heavy periods and clots** are common and some periods may last longer. Most women will also experience irregular periods which make it harder to prepare for them.

**Vaginal symptoms** such as vaginal dryness, itching or discomfort are also common. These happen not only during the menopause and shortly after but can also occur in the period leading up to the change taking place. Sometimes it's difficult to tell if symptoms are caused by the menopause or by other factors in midlife. Many women may feel confused or powerless if they don't understand why their body is behaving in the way it is.

**Emotional symptoms** including uncontrollable bouts of weepiness, mood swings, irritability.

# Women's experience at work

In 2011 the British Occupational Health Research Foundation (BOHRF) published research by the University of Nottingham exploring the experience of working through the menopause.

This showed that many women found they are/were little prepared for the onset of the menopause, and even less equipped to manage its symptoms at work.

- Over half had not disclosed their symptoms to their manager.
  - Many of the women felt they needed further advice and support.
  - Workplaces and working practices are not designed with menopausal women in mind.
  - Heavy and painful periods, hot flushes, mood disturbance, fatigue and poor concentration pose significant and embarrassing problems for some women, resulting in lowered confidence.
  - Women are often uncomfortable disclosing their difficulties to their managers, particularly if those managers are younger than them or male.
- Where women had taken time off work to deal with their symptoms, only half of them disclosed the real reason for absence to their line managers.
  - Some women said they worked extremely hard to overcome their perceived shortcomings due to menopause.
  - Others considered working part-time, although they were concerned about the impact on their career if they did so, or had even thought about leaving the labour force altogether.



# How can managers support

Women who are experiencing the menopause need support from line management. With any longstanding health-related condition this is crucial and can make a major difference to how a woman will deal with the issues arising from the menopause. Work can affect women working through the menopause in various ways, especially if they cannot make healthy choices at work. Action for Children managers need to be aware of the steps they can take to support women experiencing the menopause.

## Training

Line managers can access a webinar about the menopause and their responsibilities to staff experiencing it. The webinar ensures managers are clear about what support and assistance they are required to offer, including what adjustments may be necessary to support women who are experiencing the menopause.

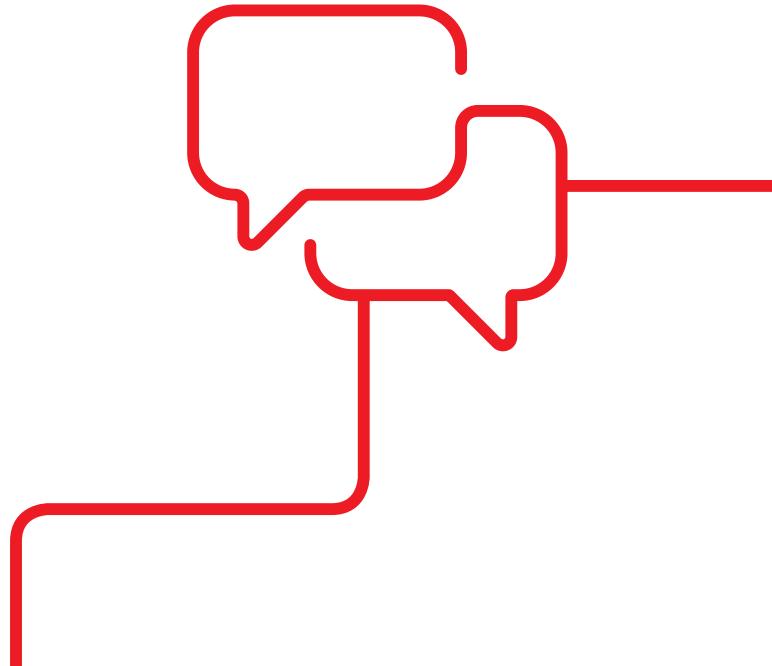
## Support group

Action for Children has a positive attitude to supporting women who are experiencing the menopause and it is something that women should not feel embarrassed about. There is a support group that is available for all women to join and is regularly updated with the latest research and reports the groups meets virtually, bi monthly.

## Employee assistance

Action for Children recognises that it has a direct interest in creating an ethos which sees risk managed well and proportionately and an environment which helps employees, volunteers and supporters make safe and healthy choices. The Employee Assistance Programme – Health Assured is intended to help you, your partner, or children living with you deal with personal problems that might adversely impact work performance, life, health, and wellbeing.

Health Assured Number – **0800 030 5182**  
Health Portal **[www.healthassuredeap.com](http://www.healthassuredeap.com)**  
(Username: action and Password: children)



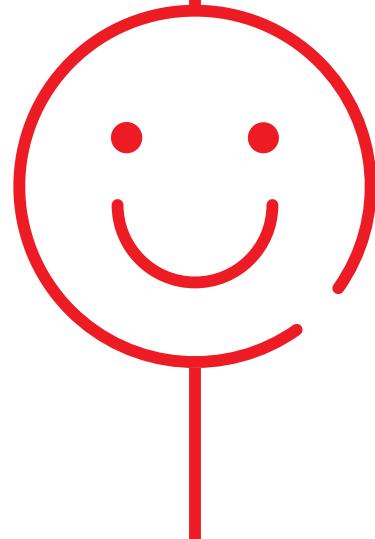
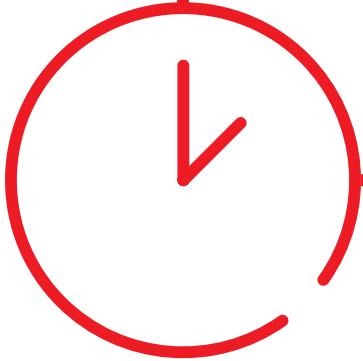
## Flexible working arrangements

Action for Children is committed to offering flexible, modern employment practices, which recognise that all our employees want to strike a sensible balance between their work and home life. Action for Children also recognises that different balances may be needed at different times during an employee's working life, for example, during the menopause.

## Risk assessments

Assessments should consider the specific needs of menopausal women and ensure that the working environment will not make their symptoms worse. Issues that should be looked at include temperature and ventilation and the materials used in any uniform or corporate clothing provided to female workers. The assessments should also address welfare issues such as toilet facilities and access to cold water.

It is important to remember that workplace stress can worsen menopausal symptoms and in some cases, has been shown to bring on an earlier menopause. Stress should be risk assessed alongside concerns like temperature and access to facilities.



# How can managers support

The following organisations have produced leaflets or guides on the menopause. Check their website for more details. Leaflets for distribution within the workplace may also be available through your local NHS Trust.

Useful sources of information include:

## **NHS**

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause)

## **Menopause Matters**

<http://menopausematters.co.uk>

## **The British Menopause Society**

<https://thebms.org.uk>

## **Menopause UK**

<http://menopauseuk.org>

## **Menopause Support**

<http://menopausesupport.co.uk>



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