



University of Essex

# General guidance about **Menopause**

People and Culture

## About the guidance

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The aim of this guidance is to provide information and support to help you at work if you are affected by menopause, or if you are supporting someone experiencing the menopause.

This guidance is designed to:

- Create awareness of the menopause and the symptoms that can be experienced.
- Help identify various workplace factors that may negatively impact on staff experiencing the menopause.
- Consider practices and environments within our University that may require adjustments to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of staff.
- Consider best practice for our University to support staff going through the menopause.

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## What is the menopause?

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The menopause is part of the natural ageing process. Sometimes referred to as ‘the change’, it is the point in time when menstruation (periods) stop marking the end of reproductive life. The term “menopause” is used when menstruation has ceased for 12 consecutive months.

The menopause usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55. In the UK, the average age is 51, but it can happen much earlier.



## What are the symptoms?

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The perimenopause is the period of hormonal change leading up to the menopause. This is the time when many people start to experience symptoms. The perimenopause can often last for four to five years although for some it may continue for many more years or for others last just a few months.

Some individuals may find that their symptoms change and other symptoms may develop over time. The severity of symptoms experienced also varies from individual to individual. Some of the physical and psychological symptoms commonly reported are as followed:

- hot flushes and palpitations
- night sweats (increased sweating may also be experienced during the day)
- insomnia and sleep disturbances
- joint aches
- hair loss
- changes to periods such as irregular, heavy bleeding or painful periods
- vaginal dryness, itching and discomfort
- depression
- anxiety
- panic attacks
- mood swings
- irritability
- problems with memory
- loss of confidence

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Many individuals do not always realise that they are experiencing the perimenopause and may not understand what is causing their symptoms. This can be a barrier to accessing support.

Medical advice and forms of therapy are available to help alleviate symptoms of the perimenopause and menopause. Individuals should speak to their GP to explore these options.

It is important to recognise that each person's journey through menopause is unique to them so as a community we need to be flexible in our approach to ensure that we offer the help that each individual may need. What treatment is a success for one person may not be appropriate for another, so it is important that we remain patient and supportive.



## Who is affected?

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Often, people assume that the menopause mainly affects women in their late forties or early fifties. Although it is true to a certain extent, it should be noted that this is an average as many people experience the menopause at a younger age due to an early, premature, surgical or medical menopause.

- **Natural menopause:** Usually occurs between 45 and 55.
- **Early menopause:** Individuals experiencing the menopause before the age of 45.
- **Premature menopause:** Individuals experiencing the menopause before the age of 40. In some cases, it can happen to people in their teens and twenties. In many cases, there is no clear cause of a premature menopause.
- **Medical or surgical menopause:** Some individuals experience the menopause because of medical reasons or due to surgery. This can happen because of cancer treatments, or if the ovaries are removed as part of a hysterectomy, for example.

Family members, partners and colleagues of individuals experiencing the menopause can also be indirectly affected.

It is also important to remember that members of our trans, non-binary and intersex communities will also experience the menopause, and the additional stigma and bias towards these communities can provide further barriers inhibiting people from accessing support.

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It is therefore imperative that we understand that every individual's experience of the perimenopause and menopause will be different. This should not only be accepted but reflected in the way that we provide support. Support should be focussed on the individual and remain flexible to help each person in the way that they need.





## What are the workplace issues?

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According to Professor Jo Brewis, co-author of a government report on the menopause, “menopausal women are the fastest growing workforce demographic”<sup>1</sup>.

This suggests that the way that we work and our working environments needs to adapt and evolve in order to continue supporting our colleagues experiencing the menopause.

Research conducted by the TUC (Trades Union Congress)<sup>2</sup> identified a number of workplaces factors that could either worsen symptoms of the menopause or make it more difficult to raise the issue and ask for adjustments.

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<sup>1</sup> Brewis, J., Beck, V., Davies, A. and Matheson, J., 2017. *The Effects Of Menopause Transition On Women’S Economic Participation In The UK*. [online] Department for Education. Available at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/menopause-transition-effects-on-womens-economic-participation>> [Accessed 28 April 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Wales TUC, 2017. *The Menopause In The Workplace: A Toolkit For Trade Unionists*. [online] Cardiff: Wales TUC. Available at: <<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Menopause%20toolkit%20Eng%20FINAL.pdf>> [Accessed 28 April 2020].

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These included:

- Lack of appropriate gender sensitive risk assessments
- Inadequate access to drinking water
- Inadequate or non-existent toilet/washing facilities
- Lack of control of temperature/light/ventilation
- Lack of appropriate uniforms or personal protective equipment (PPE) Inflexible working time rules/inflexible break times
- Inflexible policies which penalise individuals going through the (peri)menopause because of their symptoms (i.e. sickness records)
- Lack of awareness of the menopause amongst managers and colleagues
- Bullying and harassment

In addition to our institutional commitment of equality and inclusion amongst all members of our university community, the menopause is covered by the Equality Act 2010. Failing to adapt our environment and effectively support members of our community who are experiencing the menopause could be discrimination on the grounds of sex, age or disability discrimination.



## What can individuals do?

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Current health promotion advice highlights the importance of lifestyle choices, before, during and after the menopause and the benefits of:

- Eating a healthy, balanced diet
- Exercising regularly
- Drinking plenty of water
- Wearing natural fibres such as cotton
- Consulting with a GP on the management of the menopause and ensuring that symptoms are not due to other causes.
- Stopping smoking
- Cutting down on caffeine and alcohol
- Increasing access to natural light
- Getting adequate rest and relaxation

These measures can help with some symptoms of menopause and may also help to reduce the risk of osteoporosis ('brittle bones'), diabetes and heart disease in later life.

If you feel the menopause is affecting you at work, speak to your manager or colleagues in People and Culture to seek support.

## What can colleagues do?

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- Develop an understanding of the menopause
- Be supportive and understanding when colleagues make you aware that they are dealing with the menopause and its symptoms.
- Reflect upon the unconscious biases we may hold about the menopause, and respectfully challenge the biases we observe in the behaviour and actions of others.

## What can line managers do?

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- Develop an understanding of the menopause
- Read through the accompanying document 'holding supportive conversations about the menopause'.
- Recognise that engaging in regular, supportive conversations about health can enable staff to feel better supported at work
- Recognise that they are not menopause experts and are not expected to be to support their colleagues in the way a health professional would.
- Understand that how individuals manage their menopause symptoms is between them and their GP or menopause specialist, unless it is affecting their work or they would like to talk about it. Although we want to create an environment where people feel safe and supported to talk about their health at work, no one should be pressurised to discuss personal information.

## What can the university do?

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- Adopt a people-centred approach to how health and wellbeing is supported at work. This includes creating the environment and platform in which menopause can be spoken about openly and without fear of judgement or embarrassment. It is a natural phase of life that needs to be normalised and stigma around it must be eradicated.
- Within this approach, information and support will also be provided to managers to enable them to have conversations with team members experiencing menopause, fostering an environment in which individuals feel comfortable and confident talking to their managers, where managers follow clear, coherent and flexible guidelines and direct staff to occupational health, if necessary.
- Provide general guidance to ensure that all colleagues have a clear understanding of menopause
- Consider a range of reasonable adjustments to assist those working with the effects of menopause. These are usually straightforward and simple to implement, such as a desktop fan or extra uniform and flexible working patterns.

## Example Adjustments

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The table on the next page gives some examples of adjustments that may be helpful for various symptoms of the menopause. These are in addition to the health and safety legal requirements that must be in place for all staff. The suggested adjustments are not comprehensive and, in addition to understanding the below, it is important to speak to individuals experiencing the menopause to understand what might work for them and what will not.

## Where can you get help?

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- People and Culture - <https://www.essex.ac.uk/information/professional-services/human-resources-section>
- Occupational Health - <https://www.essex.ac.uk/information/professional-services/occupational-health-team>
- NHS information pages - [www.nhs.uk/Conditions?menopause/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions?menopause/Pages/Introduction.aspx)
- British Menopause Society – [www.thebms.org.uk/](http://www.thebms.org.uk/)
- Menopause Matters – [www.menopausematters.co.uk](http://www.menopausematters.co.uk)

## Example Adjustments Table

Symptom	Examples of workplace factors which could worsen or interact with symptoms	Suggested adjustments
<b>Daytime sweats, hot flushes, palpitations</b>	Unsuitable workplace temperatures and lack of ventilation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Identify hot and cold spots in the workplace and review office seating plans to allow workspace to be positioned based on suitability and need.</li><li>▪ Cool the working environment for those affected by providing fans at workstations, moving desks closer to open windows, and/or adjusting air conditioning units.</li></ul>

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Symptom	Examples of workplace factors which could worsen or interact with symptoms	Suggested adjustments
<b>Daytime sweats, hot flushes, palpitations</b>	Unsuitable uniforms, workwear or personal protective equipment (PPE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Avoid nylon or close-fitting uniforms, provide alternatives made from natural fibres.</li> <li>▪ ‘One size fits all’ blanket issue items are unlikely to be suitable for all members of the team. Review whether suitable alternative items of PPE can be appropriately provided.</li> </ul>
<b>Daytime sweats, hot flushes, palpitations</b>	Lack of access to rest breaks or suitable break areas. Hot flushes and facial redness may cause staff to feel self-conscious or the sensation may affect concentration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Additional breaks when required.</li> <li>▪ Allow time out of the office for fresh air.</li> <li>▪ Provide access to a quiet area/room.</li> <li>▪ Ensure cover is available so workers can leave their posts if needed.</li> </ul>



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<b>Symptom</b>	<b>Examples of workplace factors which could worsen or interact with symptoms</b>	<b>Suggested adjustments</b>
<b>Night-time sweats and hot flushes. Insomnia or sleep disturbance.</b>	Rigid start/finish times and lack of flexible working options may increase fatigue at work due to lack of sleep. This may be compounded if shift work is carried out.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Reassure workers that they will not be penalised or suffer detriment if they require adjustments to workload or performance management targets.</li><li>▪ Consider temporary adjustment of shift patterns or hours to accommodate any difficulties</li><li>▪ Accommodate flexible/home working requests.</li><li>▪ Provide the option of alternative tasks/duties.</li><li>▪ Make allowance for potential need for absence</li></ul>

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<b>Symptom</b>	<b>Examples of workplace factors which could worsen or interact with symptoms</b>	<b>Suggested adjustments</b>
<b>Irregular and/or heavy periods.</b>	Lack of access to adequate toilet facilities may increase the risk of infection and cause distress and an increase in stress levels. Individuals may need to access toilet and washroom facilities more frequently.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Allow for more frequent breaks in work to go to the toilet/ washroom.</li><li>▪ Ensure sanitary products are readily available.</li><li>▪ Take account of peripatetic workers schedules and allow them to access facilities during their working day.</li><li>▪ Ensure cover is available so staff can leave their posts if needed.</li></ul>

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<b>Symptom</b>	<b>Examples of workplace factors which could worsen or interact with symptoms</b>	<b>Suggested adjustments</b>
<b>Skin irritation, dryness or itching.</b>	Unsuitable uniforms, workwear, PPE or workplace temperatures and humidity may increase skin irritation, dryness and itching.  This can cause discomfort and an increased risk of infection.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Avoid nylon uniforms where safe to do so and provide alternatives made from natural fibres.</li><li>▪ Ensure comfortable working temperatures and humidity.</li><li>▪ Ensure easy access to well-maintained toilet and washroom or shower facilities.</li><li>▪ Allow for more frequent breaks in work to go to the toilet/ washroom.</li></ul>

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<b>Symptom</b>	<b>Examples of workplace factors which could worsen or interact with symptoms</b>	<b>Suggested adjustments</b>
<b>Muscular aches and bone and joint pains.</b>	Lifting, manual handling, repetitive movements or static postures may be more uncomfortable and there may be an increased risk of injury.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Make any necessary adjustments through review of risk assessments and work schedules/tasks and keep under review.</li><li>▪ Consider providing alternative lower risk tasks.</li><li>▪ Follow HSE guidance and advice on manual handling and preventing musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)</li></ul>
<b>Headaches.</b>	Factors such as artificial lighting, poor air quality, screen work, workplace stress, poor posture and workplace temperatures can trigger or worsen headaches.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Ensure comfortable working temperatures, humidity and good air quality.</li><li>▪ Ensure access to natural light and ability to adjust artificial light.</li><li>▪ Allow additional rest breaks.</li><li>▪ Ensure a quiet area/room is available.</li></ul>

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<p><b>Psychological symptoms such as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Depression</b></li><li>• <b>Anxiety</b></li><li>• <b>Panic Attacks</b></li><li>• <b>Mood changes</b></li><li>• <b>Loss of confidence and self-esteem</b></li></ul>	<p>Excessive workloads, unsupportive management/colleagues, stigma around the menopause, bullying and harassment and any form of work-related stress may exacerbate symptoms. Stress can have wide ranging negative effects on mental and physical health and wellbeing. Performance and workplace relationships may be affected.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Carry out a stress risk assessment and address work related stress through implementation of the HSE's management standards.</li><li>▪ Ensure that workers will not be penalised or suffer detriment if they require adjustments to workload, tasks or performance management targets.</li><li>▪ Ensure that managers understand the menopause and are prepared to discuss any concerns that staff may have in a supportive manner.</li><li>▪ Ensure managers have a positive attitude and understand that they should offer adjustments to workload and tasks if needed.</li><li>▪ Make allowance for potential need for sickness absence.</li></ul>
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<b>Symptom</b>	<b>Examples of workplace factors which could worsen or interact with symptoms</b>	<b>Suggested adjustments</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Ensure that staff are trained in mental health awareness.</li><li>▪ Raise general awareness of issues around the menopause so colleagues are more likely to be supportive.</li><li>▪ Provide opportunities to network with colleagues experiencing similar issues (menopause action and support group). Ensure a quiet area/room is available.</li><li>▪ Signpost to wellbeing and counselling services.</li></ul>

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<b>Memory problems and difficulty concentrating</b>	<p>Certain tasks may become more difficult to carry out temporarily and performance may be affected. Learning new skills may be compounded by lack of sleep and fatigue, and work-related stress may exacerbate these symptoms. Loss of confidence may result.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Reassure workers that they will not be penalised or suffer detriment if they require adjustments to workload or performance management targets.</li><li>▪ Ensure managers have a positive attitude and understand that they should offer adjustments to workload and tasks if needed.</li><li>▪ Reduce demands if workload identified as an issue.</li><li>▪ Provide additional time to complete tasks if needed or consider substituting with alternative tasks. Allow flexible/home working.</li><li>▪ Offer and facilitate alternative methods of communicating tasks and planning of work to assist memory. Ensure a quiet area/room is available.</li></ul>
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