

Menopause

The menopause is a natural part of the aging process in every woman's life when her balance of hormones change and ultimately her periods stop. The average age for a woman to reach menopause is 51 but commonly occurs around 45-55 years of age. Some women experience symptoms for years before this, during what is known as the perimenopause and for some women it can be much earlier due to either a natural early menopause, surgery or illness.

Some women have minor symptoms during the menopause, but others experience symptoms that can last for several years and can adversely affect a woman's personal and working life. Symptoms can be physical such as hot flushes, night sweats, sleep disruption, fatigue, joint pains and headaches, others can be psychological such as difficulty concentrating, poor memory, loss of confidence, anxiety, depression and mood swings. Not all women experience significant symptoms, but if they do, it can have a negative impact on their lives including performance and attendance at work.

Some women find menopause symptoms affect their wellbeing and capacity to work. It is important to remember that menopause is a natural and temporary stage in a woman's life and simple and supportive steps by family, friends and colleagues in the workplace can be hugely helpful to women who find they are struggling to cope with the symptoms. Medical help may also be required.

Guidance for Individuals - Symptoms and how they can be managed

The menopause can cause a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms that can last for several years. The majority of menopausal women experience symptoms, but everyone is different. Symptoms can fluctuate and be felt to varying degrees. Experiencing any of the typical symptoms can pose a challenge for women as they go about their daily lives, including at work.

Many women suffer symptoms during the menopause that cause them difficulty, embarrassment and frustration. By finding out more about the menopause and being aware of the changes happening to you, you can apply self-help strategies or seek medical advice by speaking to your GP.

Some of the most typical symptoms of the menopause include:

- Hot flushes (brief and sudden surges of heat usually felt in the face, neck and chest)
- Sleep disturbance that can make people feel tired and irritable
- Night sweats (hot flushes that happen during the night)
- Irregular periods and/or periods can become light or heavy
- Psychological issues such as mood disturbances, anxiety and/or depression, memory loss, panic attacks, loss of confidence and reduced concentration
- Muscle and joint stiffness, aches and pains
- Recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs) including cystitis
- Headaches
- Sexual problems – decreased libido / vaginal dryness / relationship difficulties

- Weight gain
- Palpitations (heartbeats that become more noticeable)
- Skin changes (dryness, acne, general itchiness)

What can you do to help yourself?

Talk about your symptoms

You may find it helpful talking about your symptoms with others, especially those also experiencing symptoms. It often helps to find out that you are not alone. If your symptoms are affecting your day-to-day life you are encouraged to discuss your needs with your manager. They may not realise that you require some assistance and if they don't know much about it you can point them and colleagues to this site for more information. Women are being encouraged to raise awareness at work to reduce the stigma of the menopause.

Hot flushes

Common triggers are alcohol, caffeine, hot and spicy foods, stress, tight clothing, cigarette smoke, bending over. Try and avoid these triggers, especially before meetings or presentations.

- If you feel a hot flush coming on at work, try sipping ice water.
- Avoid wearing wool, silk and most synthetic fabrics. These materials trap heat and can increase body temperature. Clothes made of cotton, linen or rayon breathe better, release heat and help to keep you cooler. Try to wear layers, that way you can remove layers to cool yourself down and can then put back on if you have a cold chill following the hot flush. At night, wear cotton night clothes.
- Consider asking your line manager for a small fan to place on your desk at work.
- Eating hot foods increase body temperature and can exacerbate hot flushes.
- Try eating salads and cold foods at work.
- Try not to rush around, give yourself plenty of time to get to work and to meetings. This will help keep your body temperature stable and reduce the frequency of a hot flush.

Insomnia

Night sweats can often lead to insomnia and not getting a restful night's sleep. When you are working this can be difficult especially if it happens regularly. This may result in you feeling fatigued at work and not being able to concentrate fully.

- Make sure your room is dark, quiet and safe and try to keep it as cool as possible.
- Don't drink alcohol and smoke tobacco before sleeping.
- Keep a face flannel wrapped in an ice block in a container near your bed so you can cool yourself quickly.
- Relaxation and meditation can be helpful, especially yoga and shiatsu.
- If you are really troubled by insomnia, then HRT (hormone replacement therapy) can be considered and should be discussed with your GP
- Let your manager know that you are having difficulty sleeping and it maybe that temporary flexible working hours can be put in place to help you.

Coping with Memory Loss

The brain contains oestrogen receptors responsive to the oestrogen hormone. When levels

of oestrogen hormones drop, you can suffer unexpected lapses in memory. These lapses in memory should not last. Once you are through the menopause, you should be able to recall information more effectively again.

There are certain self-help strategies one can do to help memory recall:

- Drink plenty of water – water hydrates the body and brain keeping them healthy
- Exercise – regular exercise will help to keep a rich blood flow around the brain
- Mind games – such as Sudoku and crosswords help to keep the brain active
- Eat a well-balanced diet including fish, soy products, fruit and vegetables. Vitamin B complex & Omega 3 fish oils can aid memory function
- Write lists or use your phone and computer to help you remember things
- Sleep well at night & relax – both these helps to improve mental function and concentration

Coping with anxiety

Menopause anxiety is very common and often one of the trickiest symptom to cope with during the menopause. Many women suddenly feel unable to deal with situations that were never a problem before and can become overwhelmed by simple aspects of day to day living and working. This build-up of anxiety can lead to feelings of becoming mentally unwell.

- To help alleviate this pressure, try to vent the anxiety – talk to friends, develop an exercise plan and focus on breathing.
- When you feel overwhelmed, take a few minutes to calm your breathing. Breathe in for the count of 7, and breathe out counting to 11. After a few deep relaxing breaths, your body and mind will hopefully slow down and your thoughts become much clearer.
- Develop “me-time”, take time out for yourself to relax.
- Consider relaxation techniques such as mindfulness. Other potentially helpful techniques are cognitive behavioural therapy and meditation. These can all help to reduce the impact of anxiety and a range of symptoms attributed to the menopause.
- Try cutting back on caffeine to see if that triggers your anxiety or nervousness.
- Consider your alcohol intake. Alcohol is a depressant and we can often use it as a crutch to help reduce feelings of anxiety, thereby exacerbating the issue.
- Try to keep stress to a minimum as it can make symptoms worse. Consider completing the stress risk assessment if experiencing difficulties at work.
<https://www.oh.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/ohg04.pdf>

Coping with Mood Swings

This is one of the most commonly experienced symptom of the menopause. As the oestrogen levels decline so does the level of serotonin and mood changes can be fairly sudden and dramatic. Often women feel that they are on an emotional pendulum; up one minute and down the next. Most women report reacting to things in a far stronger way than the situation merits, with irritability and less tolerance and patience than normal. This is often very frustrating and you can feel as though you are out of control. It can seem to the woman as though no-one understands what she is going through. This can be difficult for women in the workplace and lifestyle changes should be considered such as weight reduction, smoking cessation and exercise.

Eat a healthy diet

The fall in oestrogen levels can increase the risk of heart disease and osteoporosis, so focus on a low saturated fat and low salt diet to help reduce blood pressure, and a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D to strengthen bones. A healthy diet will also help with weight gain.

Stop smoking

Smoking has been linked to early menopause and can trigger hot flushes.

Counselling

The University has a confidential staff counselling service, details are in the University Support Services section below.

It is important to maintain a perspective and to maintain a sense of positive wellbeing. Some women see it as a new chapter in their lives; an opportunity to develop new interests and get fit and healthy. For others, getting through the menopause is not always easy, but by communication, sharing of information and experiences with other women, colleagues and health professionals, a woman can feel supported and better informed as she passes through this phase of her life.

Complementary and Alternative Therapies

Limited scientific research has been undertaken to consider the effect and safety of taking supplements or other alternative therapy, however, they have become popular with women and can help with some troublesome symptoms.

- Popular herbal products include: Black cohosh, red clover Dong Quai, Evening Primrose Oil, Soy, but you must check with your doctor for advice before taking any of these, as there are interactions with medications such as blood thinners e.g. warfarin, psychiatric medications and other medications.
- Some of the treatments that women have reported as being helpful are: acupuncture, aromatherapy, herbal treatments, homeopathy, hypnotherapy, yoga, reflexology, tai chi and guided breathing.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

- This is the most widely used and most effective treatment for menopausal symptoms.
- It can be taken by pill, through a vaginal cream or gel or via a patch and is a simple way of replacing the hormone oestrogen that is lost during the menopause.
- HRT aims to reduce symptoms such as hot flushes, osteoporosis, vaginal dryness, sleep and mood disturbances. Some women do experience side effects when taking it for the first time such as breast tenderness, leg cramps, nausea, bloatedness. If these haven't resolved after a few months, it may be necessary to try another type, dosage or route of HRT.
- See your GP for advice if you think HRT may help you.

Guidance for Managers

The role of line managers in supporting women experiencing menopausal symptoms is crucial. Effective management of team members with menopausal symptoms which are impacting their work will help improve your team's morale, retain valuable skills and talent and reduce sickness absence.

Women with menopausal symptoms should be supported in the same way as an employee with any ongoing health condition. As a manager you have a responsibility to consider and put in place reasonable adjustments so that women experiencing symptoms can carry on performing in their role. Small adjustments to someone's job or working pattern can help people manage their symptoms and continue to perform well in their role. The individual is best placed to recognise what might help them therefore ensure you have regular open conversations with team members.

Menopause can affect people's confidence and it can be daunting talking to someone who has no knowledge/awareness of the menopause. If a member of your team is experiencing symptoms that could possibly be caused by the menopause but they haven't disclosed it, it's important to be sensitive in how you approach them. Regular catch-ups or one-to-ones are an opportunity to start the conversation, which should always be in a private, confidential setting where the employee feels at ease. Approach the conversation with empathy and try not to be embarrassed by the issue and how the individual is feeling. If you are unsure how to broach the subject or would like some guidance please contact your HR School Team.

While any health condition can understandably be a sensitive and personal issue for many, some of the symptoms associated with the menopause can manifest themselves in a particularly intimate, even visible way. It's therefore understandable why many women feel embarrassed and reluctant to discuss the impact of their symptom. However, most people would prefer a concerned and genuine enquiry about how they are as opposed to silence.

It is important for managers to understand the issues, then offer support where appropriate.

- Be aware of the symptoms of the menopause and the difficulties that it can cause for a women.
- Have regular informal conversations to help identify if support is required. If the member of your team has not informed you that they have menopause symptoms, you could begin the conversation by saying "I notice or am wondering if you are ok? Or "You don't seem yourself" And "is there anything you need support with'.
- Carry out a stress risk assessment if relevant
- Manage workload and try to reduce stress and pressure as this can increase menopause symptoms.
- Remember that menopause symptoms can fluctuate so take a flexible approach and check in regularly with the individual.
- Offer solutions if workplace temperature and ventilation is a problem such as a desktop fan or location of a workstation near to an opening window or away from a heat source.

- Heavy and painful periods, fatigue, mood disturbance and poor concentration can pose significant and embarrassing problems for some women, resulting in lowered confidence and raised anxiety.
- Consider flexible working or shift changes if sleep is being disturbed or if they need help dealing with their symptoms.
- Consider allowing working from home on a temporary basis if relevant.
- Offer regular breaks.
- Provide access to cold drinking water if possible.
- Ensure convenient access to washroom and toilet facilities.
- Recommend using technology where appropriate for note taking and reminders if memory problems are an issue.
- Advise to see GP to discuss concerns.
- Provide time off to attend medical appointments if necessary.
- Ensure you agree if other members of the team should be informed and what they should be told by whom, otherwise ensure you maintain confidentiality
- Refer to Occupational Health for further support, advice and possible work adjustments when relevant.
- Advise to see University Staff Counselling service if appropriate.

Sources of Support

University Support Services

Occupational Health Service

The Occupational Health Service aims to complement the University's academic reputation by providing a support service that promotes and preserves both the physical and mental wellbeing of all staff, students and visitors.

Address: 16 Mill Lane, Cambridge, CB2 1SB

Tel: (3)36594

Email: occhealth@admin.cam.ac.uk

Web: www.oh.internal.admin.cam.ac.uk/

Staff Counselling Service

Confidential personal counselling to help solve personal or work-related problems away from the work environment. College staff may be seen once for assessment and onward referral in the Student Counselling Service.

Address: 17 Mill Lane, Cambridge, CB2 1RX

Tel: (7) 62160

Email: staffcouns@admin.cam.ac.uk

Web: <https://staff.counselling.cam.ac.uk/>

Sports Centre

The state of the art University of Cambridge Sports Centre is open for membership to students, staff, alumni and the wider community. The physical and mental health benefits of exercise are well known, and with a fully equipped Fitness, Strength and Conditioning Suite, Sports Hall, Multi-Purpose Room, Five Courts, Squash Courts and a variety of exercise classes, there's something for everyone.

Address: Philippa Fawcett Drive, Cambridge, CB3 0A
Tel: (3)36580
Web: www.sport.cam.ac.uk/facilities/CambridgeSportsCentre/index.html
Email: enquiries@sport.cam.ac.uk

Chaplaincy for University Staff

The Chaplain to University Staff is based at Great St Mary's, the University Church, and is available to all members of staff irrespective of their beliefs. The Chaplain also coordinates a Multi-Faith Chaplaincy Centre at Merton Hall Farmhouse on the West Cambridge site (corner of Madingley Road/JJ Thomson Avenue). The Centre has a number of prayer rooms, meeting rooms, a coffee lounge and a kitchen. It is accessible 24 hours a day (The key combination is available from the Chaplain).

Tel: 41719 (including details of all faith chaplaincies)
Email: chaplain@gsm.cam.ac.uk
Web: www.gsm.cam.ac.uk/Chaplaincy/

University Wellbeing Advocates

Wellbeing Advocates provide guidance and a general signposting service about wellbeing issues, including mental or physical health and dignity at work concerns, to members of staff within their own Institution/Faculty/Department. They also promote local and University-wide wellbeing initiatives. Most Wellbeing Advocates have completed Mental Health Lite training and other training to help their signposting role.

Other Useful Resources

NHS guidance on menopause – www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/ Women's Health

Concern (the patient arm of the British Menopause Society) – www.womens-health-concern.org

British Menopause Society – <https://thebms.org.uk>

Support for premature menopause – www.daisynetwork.org.uk

Faculty of Occupational Medicine – www.fom.ac.uk/health-at-work-2/information-for-employers/dealing-with-health-problems-in-the-workplace/advice-on-the-menopause

Henpicked, Menopause in the Workplace – <https://menopauseintheworkplace.co.uk>

Menopause Café – 'gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss menopause' – www.menopausecafe.net

Talking Menopause – www.talkingmenopause.co.uk

The Menopause Exchange – www.menopause-exchange.co.uk

Menopause Matters – www.menopausematters.co.uk Menopause Support – <https://menopausupport.co.uk/>

Meg's Menopause – <https://megsmenopause.com/menopause/>