# Me, Work and the Menopause FAQs

USDAW EQUALITIES

1. **What is the menopause, and what is the perimenopause?**

   Menopause is when your periods stop due to lower hormone levels, which usually happens between the ages of 45 and 55. However, this is just an average and many women experience it at a younger age. Sometimes the menopause happens earlier for natural reasons, or it can be triggered by surgery or treatment for other conditions, or for reasons which are unknown. Perimenopause is when you have symptoms before your periods stop, which can start years before your periods stop and carry on afterwards. You reach menopause when you haven't had a period for 12 months.

2. **Does everyone experience the menopause in the same way?**

   No, everyone's experience is individual, but there are common symptoms including hot flushes, night sweats, anxiety, brain fog, mood swings, insomnia, fatigue and dry eyes and dry mouth.

3. **How long does the menopause last?**

   As everyone's experience is unique, the length of time symptoms can be present can vary significantly. According to the NHS, on average, women continue experiencing symptoms for four years after their last period, but around 10 per cent continue experiencing symptoms for up to 12 years after. The perimenopause often lasts around five years, but in some cases can last much longer, or it may only last a few months.

4. **How can I be sure it's the menopause?**

   Many women don't always realise that they are experiencing the menopause, and so may not understand what is causing their symptoms. In these circumstances it is not unusual for women to feel that they are 'going mad' or to worry that their symptoms are caused by a long term illness or condition such as dementia. This inevitably delays access to treatment and support. If you are unsure or are in the least bit concerned about anything you are experiencing that doesn't seem right to you, contact your GP to arrange to discuss the symptoms you are experiencing.

5. **Do trans people experience the menopause?**

   Many trans people are likely to experience menopausal symptoms. Some may not wish to disclose their trans status and, as a result, be reluctant to discuss symptoms if doing so would disclose their trans status. The word 'trans' covers a wide range of experiences. There are many different factors and personal circumstances that affect how a trans person experiences the menopause. If you want to find out more about the issues facing trans workers, take a look at Usdaw's leaflet *Changing Gender – Understanding The Issues (Leaflet 424)* at: **www.usdaw.org.uk/424**

6. **What about the male menopause?**

   The 'male menopause', sometimes called 'andropause', is described on the NHS website as 'an unhelpful term sometimes used in the media'. It's misleading because it suggests symptoms which some men develop in their late 40s to early 50s – including mood swings, difficulty sleeping and poor concentration – result from a sudden drop in testosterone in middle age, similar to female menopause; but this is not true. Although testosterone levels fall as men age, the decline is steady and minimal each year. This is unlikely to cause problems in of itself.

7. **Why is the menopause being talked about so much?**

   The menopause affects all women at some stage, be that earlier or later in life, and it can often indirectly affect their partners, families and colleagues. The majority of women report that it has a significant impact on health and wellbeing. Many women report that it also makes existing health conditions worse, triggering or coinciding with flare-ups.

8. **What about people who say it's a natural part of ageing, that women have been experiencing this for centuries, and should just get on with it?**

The impacts of symptoms can be significant, so this isn't something women should just 'get on' with. Also, women make up a bigger proportion of the modern workforce, and numbers of older workers are increasing, meaning many more women are now working through and beyond menopause.

As a Trade Union, we are committed to improving the working lives and conditions of all workers. Campaigning for improved support for women working through the menopause is a part of that work, as is encouraging and normalising conversations about the menopause in the workplace, and ensuring people know what support is available and where they can access it.

9. **Why does the menopause matter at work?**

Many women say workplace environments and practices can make symptoms worse, and want to see a change in the way it is handled by workplaces. Even in places where most workers are women, employers can be slow to recognise that additional consideration or adjustments may be required to enable women to continue to work through the menopause. This can lead to women hiding symptoms, or talking about them only in a jovial way. Some feel forced to leave work entirely. Traditionally, it was seen as a private matter, or 'a women's issue', often not taken into account when workplaces were designed and working practices drawn up. In many cases it still isn't recognised by managers as a workplace issue.

10. **What should employers do?**

Employers have a duty to consider how the health and safety of menopausal women may be put at risk, and how they may face discrimination. They should provide training, develop clear policies in consultation with Unions, run awareness campaigns, establish points of contact, improve access to support, and aim to employ all staff on secure contracts with decent conditions.

Risk assessments should consider specific needs of menopausal women and ensure the working environment will not make symptoms worse. Consideration should be given to factors including temperature, ventilation, toilet facilities, appropriate uniforms, flexible policies, access to cold water, training, and security of employment.

In some circumstances, conditions arising from menopause may also meet the definition of 'impairment' under the Equality Act. Women whose experience meets this definition, so are considered to have a disability under the Act, are protected from discrimination and entitled to reasonable adjustments. By fostering safer and fairer workplaces, employers are more likely to retain skilled, experienced workers and benefit from increased morale.

11. **How do I find out if my employer has a workplace policy?**

If your workplace has an online portal or staff Intranet, a menopause policy may be available to view. You could also speak to your rep or manager, to find out if there is one and where to find it.

12. **I'm struggling at work because of menopausal symptoms, what can I do?**

You could speak to your workplace rep about how the workplace, your job duties, working hours or policies and practices might be aggravating your symptoms, and what adjustments can be put in place to help. Also, a GP, nurse or pharmacist can advise you and help with symptoms.

13. **I'm a male rep. How can I support a member whose menopause is affecting her at work?**

As well as being a women's equality issue, the menopause is also a health and safety issue. You could find out more by taking a look at Usdaw's advice on menopause for reps; you could give the member a copy of the members' leaflet on menopause; you could ask the member whether they would like a private and confidential conversation, to explore whether the workplace is aggravating their symptoms – and if so, what adjustments might be made that could help. You could use the Talking Toolkit to help guide your conversation with the member and to make notes.

14. **When am I likely to start the menopause?**

The menopause usually happens between the ages of 45 and 55. However, this is just an average and many women experience it at a younger age.

15. **What can I do if my manager isn't sure what they should do, or tells me the menopause is a personal health issue and not a workplace matter?**

Talk to your Usdaw rep about the situation. You might also bring to your manager's attention Usdaw's campaign leaflets on the menopause, or point them in the direction of the following sources of information available online:

NHS – Menopause

web: **www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause**

CIPD – Let's Talk Menopause

web: **www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/menopause**

MFAQ July 2024
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