**Menopause in the Workplace**

Guidance for Employees

We are committed to protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of our employees and providing a safe and supportive working environment for all. Providing support to those affected by the menopause and associated symptoms is an important aspect of our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and supporting the health and wellbeing of our staff.

This guidance has been developed to support to employees who are experiencing menopausal symptoms.

**Guidance** has also been developed for managers to help them support colleagues whose menopause symptoms are affecting their comfort and performance at work.

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What is the Menopause?

The menopause is a natural event in most women’s lives when hormonal changes occur and they stop having periods. This usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55 years old and typically lasts around four years from a woman’s last period, although around one in ten women experience symptoms for up to twelve years. In the UK the average age to undergo the menopause is 51 years, however it can be earlier or later due to surgery, illness, treatment or other reasons. Some trans and non-binary people may also experience menopausal symptoms.

**Perimenopause** is the time leading up to the menopause when a person’s hormone balance starts to change and they may start to experience menopausal symptoms. This period can last for months or years before the menopause.

**Post menopause** is the time after the menopause has occurred, starting when a person has not had a period for twelve consecutive months.

**Premature menopause** is when the menopause is experienced before the age of 40.

Symptoms of the Menopause

The menopause can cause a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms. Not everyone undergoing the menopause experiences symptoms, but the majority of people experience notable changes during this time. Symptoms can fluctuate and be felt to varying degrees. Experiencing any of the typical symptoms can pose a significant challenge for people as they go about their daily lives, including at work.

The most common menopausal symptoms are associated with a decrease in the body’s production of oestrogen and include:

* Hot flushes - brief/sudden surges of heat, usually felt in the face, neck and chest
* Sleep disturbance - may make people feel tired and irritable during the day
* Irregular periods and/or periods can become light or heavy
* Night sweats – hot flushes that occur during the night
* Psychological issues, such mood disturbances, anxiety and/or depression, memory loss, panic attacks, loss of confidence and reduced concentration - some women describe this as ‘brain fog’
* Muscle and joint stiffness, aches and pains
* Recurrent urinary tract infections
* Irritated skin
* Headaches
* Palpitations (heartbeats that become more noticeable)
* Sexual problems – decreased libido, vaginal dryness, relationship difficulties

It is important to note that not everyone will notice every symptom, or even need help or support. Some people will choose to use HRT (hormone replacement therapy), others may choose to alleviate symptoms with alternative therapies or diet and exercise.

Whilst the menopause itself is not considered to be a disability – it is a phase in every woman’s life – menopause symptoms can give rise to a disability under the Equality Act 2010 if they have a long-term and substantial effect on normal day-to-day activities. The **Disability Guidance for Employees and Managers** provides further information about the support that is available in these circumstances.

How can the University help?

**Talk about your symptoms**

If you are dealing with symptoms of the menopause which are effecting your comfort and/or performance at work, please speak with your manager at an early stage to explain your difficulties and discuss what support can be put in place to help you.

If you don’t feel comfortable speaking with your line manager, we would encourage you to speak to someone else who can offer support and advice. This could be someone from the HR team or another manager in your area of work. If you are a member of a trade union, you could speak with one of their representatives.

We are committed to supporting people who are experiencing the menopause and any conversations you have will be treated sensitively and confidentially, with the aim of helping you to work as comfortably and productively as possible.

You may also find it helpful talking about your symptoms with others, especially those also experiencing symptoms. It often helps to find out you are not alone.

Tips for discussing your symptoms with your manager

Whilst we recognise that it may be difficult to talk openly about menopause symptoms, the best way to receive support at work is to speak with your manager and explain that you would like a meeting to discuss your work and wellbeing. It is helpful to mention in advance that it is specifically the menopausal symptoms and affects, if you can. This will allow your manager to better familiarise themselves with the available guidance. Below are some tips for preparing for the meeting and what you could discuss at the meeting.

* Book a time with your manager and arrange to meet somewhere private.
* It may be helpful to keep a diary of your symptoms and the effect they are having so that you can be specific in the meeting.
* Be honest and try to explain your situation clearly, e.g. if you are experiencing hot flushes, what effect are they having on you.
* If you are experiencing psychological symptoms, try to discuss these so that consideration can be given to how best to support you emotionally, as well as practically.
* Consider any practical and reasonable adjustments which may help you to be more comfortable at work so that you can discuss these with your manager in the meeting.
* If you are seeking medical help, it may be helpful to discuss this with your manager so that they are aware that you may need to attend medical appointments etc.
* The information that you provide to your manager will be kept confidential unless you wish any of your colleagues to be told and if you do, you should agree who will be told, by whom and what information you do, or don’t want to be shared.
* Keep a note of any agreed actions or support so that you have a record which can be referred to in future meetings.
* You should ensure that you meet regularly so that you can discuss how you are feeling, if the adjustments are helpful and if any additional support is required.

**Examples of workplace adjustments**

Simple changes to your role or working environment may help to ease your symptoms at work. Examples of the types of potential adjustments that you may wish to consider discussing with your manager include:

* Moving away from a radiator, closer to ventilation or having a desk fan.
* Identifying a private area where you can go to rest, recover or make a telephone call to access personal or professional support.
* Taking more frequent breaks during the day.
* If you wear a uniform which is contributing to your discomfort, making adjustments to it or wearing alternative clothing.
* Amending some of your duties if they are affected by concentration.
* Utilising technology where appropriate, e.g. setting reminders if your memory is affected.
* If you are suffering from fatigue or sleep deprivation, consider whether a temporary flexible working arrangement might help, if this is feasible, for example a later start time in the morning or occasional homeworking.

If you have any concerns about work-related pressures being triggered by the menopause, you should consider carrying out a [Stress Risk Assessment](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/HRDocuments/Pages/Forms.aspx) with your manager.

If your symptoms are severe or initial adjustments don’t seem to be helping you can obtain advice from Occupational Health where you can explain the difficulties you are experiencing and discuss any further adjustments that may be beneficial to you.

What can you do?

**Visit your GP**

It’s worth talking to your GP if you have menopausal symptoms that are troubling you or if they are impacting your ability to work, or getting in the way of you enjoying life. Some support may only be available to you after you have consulted with a medical professional.

**Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)**

**Your GP may offer treatments such as HRT if you have severe menopausal symptoms that interfere with your day-to-day life. HRT is the most widely used treatment for menopausal symptoms, although it is not advisable for some women, such as those who have had certain types of breast cancer or are at high risk of getting breast cancer. It can be taken by pill, through a vaginal cream or gel or via a patch and replaces the hormone oestrogen that is lost during the menopause.**

**HRT aims to reduce symptoms such as hot flushes, osteoporosis, vaginal dryness, and sleep and mood disturbances. Some people experience side effects when taking it for the first time and if these haven’t resolved after a few months, it may be necessary to try another type, dosage or route of HRT.**

**Complementary and Alternative Therapies**

Limited scientific research has been undertake to consider the effect and safety of taking supplements or other alternative therapy, however they have become more popular and may help alleviate some troublesome symptoms. Some treatments that are reported to be helpful are acupuncture, aromatherapy, herbal treatments, homeopathy, yoga, reflexology, tai chi and guided breathing.

**Lifestyle factors**

A healthy lifestyle can minimise the effects of the menopause.

* **Healthy diet** – the fall in oestrogen levels can increase the risk of heart disease and osteoporosis, focusing on reducing saturated fat and salt helps to reduce blood pressure, and a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D helps to strengthen bones. A healthy diet will also help with weight gain. Dietary supplements may help to get the balance right.
* **Exercise** – can help to convert stress into positive energy, while guarding against heart disease.
* **Smoking** – smoking has been shown to lead an earlier menopause and trigger hot flushes.
* **Alcohol** – increases hot flushes and is a depressant often used as a crutch to help reduce feelings of anxiety, thereby exacerbating the issue.
* **Stress levels** – reducing stress levels. You can access specific NHS advice about dealing with stress [here](https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing/stress/struggling-with-stress%20)

**Coping with psychological effects**

Increased anxiety is a common symptom of the menopause, many people 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. To help alleviate this pressure and reduce stress levels, try to vent the anxiety – talk with friends, colleagues, develop an exercise plan and focus on breathing.

Taking time out for yourself and relaxation techniques such as mindfulness, cognitive behavioural therapy and meditation may help to reduce the impact of anxiety and symptoms attributed to the menopause.

If you are experiencing difficulties at work, completing a [Stress Risk Assessment](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/HRDocuments/Pages/Forms.aspx) with your manager may help to identify work place pressures and actions that can be taken to address these.

Another common symptom of the menopause is mood swings. When oestrogen levels decline, so do the level of serotonin and mood changes can be fairly sudden. People can feel more irritable and less tolerant and patient than normal which can be very frustrating and it can feel as though no-one else understands what they are going through.

University and external support is available and you can access the resources below for advice and guidance about coping with symptoms.

Sources of support

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| Human Resources | The HR team can provide support and advice. Call the team on x3344 or email [HumanResources@napier.ac.uk](mailto:HumanResources@napier.ac.uk) |
| Trade Unions | Employees who are members of the [Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS)](https://www.eis.org.uk/) or [UNISON](https://www.unison.org.uk/) can receive support and advice from their trade union representative. |
| [University's Health & Wellbeing Intranet Page](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/workingattheUniversity/healthandwellbeing/Pages/MentalHealthandWellbeing.aspx) | The University’s Health and Wellbeing Intranet Page contains a number of resources to support the wellbeing of staff. |
| [Employee Assistance Programme](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/workingattheUniversity/healthandwellbeing/Pages/Employee%20Assistance%20Programme.aspx) | Free, external and confidential wellbeing service that provides emotional, practical and physical support across a wide range of areas for all employees to access. |
| [Occupational Health](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/workingattheUniversity/healthandwellbeing/Pages/OccupationalHealth.aspx) | Provides information about potential reasonable adjustments to support employees in the workplace. |
| [Stress Risk Assessment](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/HRDocuments/Pages/Forms.aspx) | This can help to facilitate identify appropriate actions to mitigate/reduce impact and address areas of concern. |
| [Togetherall](https://togetherall.com/en-gb/) | Provides 24/7 online support from experienced clinicians, plus a range of courses and tools to help people self-manage their wellbeing. |

**External resources**

* [Coping with the menopause NHS - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6MG0y9j2Z4)
* [NHS](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause)
* [Daisy Network](http://www.daisynetwork.org.uk/) (premature menopause)
* [Menopause Matters](http://www.menopausematters.co.uk/)
* [Henpicked](https://henpicked.net/)
* [Menopause Exchange](https://www.menopause-exchange.co.uk/index.htm)
* [Women’s Health Concern](https://www.womens-health-concern.org/)