Menopause Awareness

Supporting your team members

**What is the menopause?**

The menopause is caused by a change in the balance of the body’s sex hormones, which occurs as a women gets older. Menopause literally means the last menstrual period and is a natural phase of life that happens when the body stops producing as much of the hormone oestrogen. Some non-binary, intersex and trans people can also experience menopausal symptoms because of the hormonal changes in the body.

The menopause usually occurs between age 45 – 55. Menopausal symptoms can begin several years before and for that reason it is often thought of as a transition. This is known as the peri-menopause and for some this can start as early as their twenties or as late as their late forties.

Around 1 in 100 experience the menopause before the age of 40. This is known as premature ovarian insufficiency (POI), or premature menopause. Often, there is no clear cause for the early onset of menopause, but it can also be as a result of surgery (for example hysterectomy, oophorectomy), illness or treatment (such as chemotherapy).

**Why is Menopause Awareness important?**

There are increasing numbers of women aged 50 to 65 in employment in the UK. This means there are increasing numbers of workers who are affected by the menopause. This guidance provides University of Stirling staff with information for those affected by the menopause and available support. This guidance may also be useful for those not affected by the menopause themselves, but working with or supervising women and those affected by the menopause.

**Supporting your team members**

**Create a supportive culture**

Many colleagues do not disclose their menopausal symptoms at work, and some who take time off work because of the menopause do not disclose the real reasons for their absence.

This can be, for example, because:

* They feel their symptoms are a private or personal matter
* They feel their symptoms might be embarrassing for them and/or the person they would be confiding in
* They do not know their line manager well enough
* They are wary because their line manager is a man, or younger or unsympathetic or will not understand
* They have not discussed or disclosed their identity as a a non-binary, intersex or trans person or feel their identity is not understood in this context
* English is not their first language, and they may not describe things in the same way
* Of cultural reasons or beliefs which mean it cannot be spoken about openly

Other worries include that:

* Their symptoms will not be taken seriously
* If they do talk, their symptoms will become widely known at work
* They will be thought to be less capable
* Their chances of promotion will be harmed

However, if your team member does not get the help and support, they need, the effects of the menopause can, for example, lead to them:

* Feeling ill
* Losing confidence to do their job
* Suffering from mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety, and depression
* Leaving their job

As a line manager, you have a key role in bringing wellbeing into the everyday, and this includes creating an environment that will encourage those team members experiencing menopause transition to speak to you about it so you can support them to fulfil their potential:

* Your regular wellbeing conversations with team members provide an opportunity for a private and informal check-in and enable a conversation about any changes to someone’s health situation, including the menopause.
* Noticing and asking people how they are on a regular basis will help to create an open and inclusive culture.
* Make sure you maintain confidentiality and only share with others what your team member has explicitly consented to.
* Do not make assumptions about your team members, e.g., that only women of a certain age will be going through the menopause. Ask open, broad questions about how people are doing, or about what you have noticed rather than asking direct questions about whether they are experiencing menopause symptoms. Everyone is different, so take your lead from the individual.
* Building relationships based on trust, empathy and respect will make it easier for your team member to feel comfortable about raising a health issue like the menopause, and easier for you to identify the support they need.

**Consider the working environment**

Even if you don’t know anyone in your team is menopausal, your workplace risk assessment should consider the impact of menopausal symptoms and ensure that the working environment will not present any barriers to someone thriving at work. It should look at things such as temperature and ventilation, the material used in any uniforms, access to rest areas, access to toilet facilities and access to cold water. Often, making simple changes can make all the difference. A [risk assessment checklist](https://stir.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/HRTeamSite/Shared%20Documents/Health%20%26%20wellbeing%20%26%20EDI/Campaigns/2022/Menopause%20Awareness%20Month%20(Oct)/Menopause%20Toolkit/Menopause%20Risk%20Assessment.docx?d=w5b5ef1d0fefc45ca92c21a88553d30e2&csf=1&web=1&e=7AqHUt) is available that lists examples of issues relating to the menopause which you can incorporate into your workplace risk assessment.

Menopause can cause or worsen anxiety and a stress risk assessment should also be carried out where someone discloses they are experiencing stress at work.

**Build your knowledge**

Staff may find it very difficult talking about the menopause and how this is affecting their health and their work, especially to someone who has no awareness of the issue. They may be embarrassed or reluctant to discuss the impact of symptoms which can be particularly intimate. You can make the discussion easier if you are able to show your knowledge about the range of menopausal symptoms and can talk about these confidently. This is about understanding how someone might be impacted at work by their symptoms not about giving any medical advice.

Information about the symptoms of menopause can be found [here](https://stir.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/HRTeamSite/Shared%20Documents/Health%20%26%20wellbeing%20%26%20EDI/Campaigns/2022/Menopause%20Awareness%20Month%20(Oct)/Menopause%20Toolkit/Menopause%20Symptom%20Checker.docx?d=w42e72d90c83b4c9283ff373614d45d7e&csf=1&web=1&e=YEWSNe).

**How to have a sensitive conversation**

Menopause may not be the only reason affecting someone’s wellbeing at work. Your regular conversations with team members provide an opportunity to ask about someone’s overall wellbeing.

Do not focus on the menopause or ask specific questions about symptoms in your regular check-in’s. Ask general questions such as ‘How are you doing at the moment’? or ‘I’ve noticed ….. and wondered if you were okay?’ or ‘You’ve had to leave early a few times recently, is there anything I can help with?’

Leave it up to the individual to disclose any symptoms or health issues. However, having a genuine interest in how they’re doing might prompt someone to tell you about how their menopause symptoms are affecting them.

If your team member does disclose, you both might find it easier to schedule a separate meeting where you can focus on this issue. When having this sensitive conversation:

**DO**

* Hold it in a way that you can both feel as relaxed as you can and are free of interruptions
* Ask simple, open, non-judgemental questions
* Encourage your team member to talk and explain their situation
* Show empathy and understanding
* Refer to a checklist of symptoms to break the ice and ensure the team member doesn’t forget to raise anything if they are finding the conversation embarrassing
* Show that you are actively listening by maintaining good eye contact, and summarising what you hear
* If you need to encourage dialogue, talk about what you know already about menopause symptoms and that you recognise these generally might impact on a person’s job – but don’t make assumptions they apply to your team member
* Ask how you could make it easier for them to manage at work
* Be patient if there are some silences
* Be prepared for the team member being upset

It may be difficult for some team members to speak to a male line manager about the menopause e.g. for cultural or religious reasons, and they may find it easier if an HR Adviser or their chosen work colleague is involved in the conversation.  Even if they want someone else to attend you should still maintain confidentiality outside of the meeting.

This [discussion template](https://stir.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/HRTeamSite/Shared%20Documents/Health%20%26%20wellbeing%20%26%20EDI/Campaigns/2022/Menopause%20Awareness%20Month%20(Oct)/Menopause%20Toolkit/Manager%20discussion%20plan%20template.docx?d=w5d612ec9a56c4609bcedc491c52a4752&csf=1&web=1&e=hhWKJJ)will help you prepare for and structure the meeting. You may find it helpful to have the list of [example reasonable adjustments](https://stir.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/HRTeamSite/Shared%20Documents/Health%20%26%20wellbeing%20%26%20EDI/Campaigns/2022/Menopause%20Awareness%20Month%20(Oct)/Menopause%20Toolkit/Examples%20of%20Adjustments.docx?d=w1c430ea4bae64aa18ce182f7a93ba9cb&csf=1&web=1&e=3j9MVl)to hand during the meeting.

**Discuss appropriate adjustments to the environment or the way the work is done**

One of the most impactful ways you can support someone is by accommodating their symptoms through reasonable adjustments that will remove or reduce the challenges they are facing.

Menopause symptoms can vary a lot from person to person so keep an open mind and avoid making assumptions about someone’s condition or how it may be affecting their ability to do their job.

However, examples of adjustments might include:

* Ensuring desk fans are accessible to the individual without them needing to ask
* Allowing breaks when needed
* Agreeing the person can use a private area if they need to rest for a while to help manage their symptoms
* Providing a quiet work environment to aid concentration
* Sitting the individual’s desk close to a window that opens
* Being flexible where possible over start and finish times to help them manage their symptoms
* Allowing flexible and agile working so they can work from home when practical
* Allowing them to leave early if their symptoms suddenly become severe

To aid your discussion, this [list](https://stir.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/HRTeamSite/Shared%20Documents/Health%20%26%20wellbeing%20%26%20EDI/Campaigns/2022/Menopause%20Awareness%20Month%20(Oct)/Menopause%20Toolkit/Menopause%20Symptom%20Checker.docx?d=w42e72d90c83b4c9283ff373614d45d7e&csf=1&web=1&e=WhXzbC) gives a range of typical symptoms and the types of adjustments and support you can consider. There may be other adjustments that are more appropriate to your team member and their role. Any adjustments should be considered within the broader context of maintaining safe working practices and procedures e.g., measures introduced as a result of Covid-19.

You can also seek the advice of Occupational Health if you find it difficult to identify appropriate ways to adapt the work environment in a way that can ease the impact of symptoms at work.

It will be helpful to record what adjustments are put in place and you should revisit any plans made to ensure the adjustments still meet your team member’s needs, as symptoms can fluctuate over time.