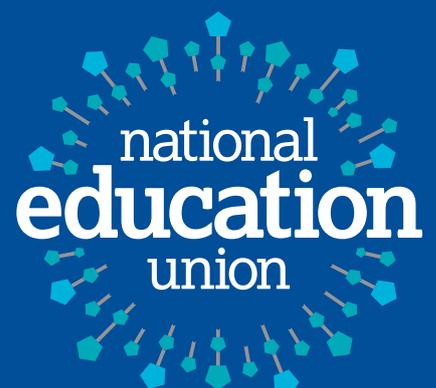


Working **through** the **menopause**

Guide for members

neu.org.uk/menopause



Working through the menopause

In a female-dominated profession such as education, supporting women who are working in schools and colleges, while at the same time experiencing symptoms of the menopause, should feature high on any school or college agenda.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Although all women will experience the menopause at some stage in their life, education staff can experience a more difficult time than women who work in other occupations and professions because of the nature of their role.

It is, therefore, important to recognise that the menopause is an occupational health issue for women educators, as well as also being an equality issue.

The menopause usually occurs between the ages of 45-55 and is defined as when a woman has stopped her periods for 12 consecutive months.

The purpose of this guidance is to suggest practical ways in which the school and college environment can be improved for women who are going through the menopause.

Contact your regional office about getting involved in local activities for NEU women.

What we say

When you read through this document you may have questions about what happens in your particular school/college or workplace and there are likely to be collective issues that affect other members. In most circumstances, you should discuss the matter with your workplace representative initially as they will know whether similar concerns have been raised by other members. If you do not have a representative at the moment it would be a good idea to get members together to elect one. Further advice on this is available at neu.org.uk/become-rep

Although members may sometimes feel that they are the only person who is affected by or concerned about a particular issue, in reality this is seldom the case. The difficulties you may experience are likely to be linked to wider conditions at the school/college and, as a member of the NEU, you have the advantage of being able to act collectively with your colleagues. This will give you the confidence of knowing that you have the weight of the union behind you.

See the **NEU menopause toolkit** for further advice and information
neu.org.uk/menopause

About the menopause?

Perimenopause

The period of hormonal change leading up to the menopause includes a variety of symptoms and can last up to five years. Employers should be aware of this as a condition that can affect women in the workplace. Many women themselves are unaware of this stage of menopause and may not associate symptoms with it. This can act as a barrier to accessing appropriate support.

Menopause

As mentioned above usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55.

Premature menopause

One per cent of women will experience menopause before the age of 40.

Medical or surgical menopause

Women whose ovaries are damaged by treatments such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy or surgery such as a hysterectomy can experience menopause at any age. Awareness is needed about the emotional effects on women experiencing a medical/surgical menopause, as well as the physical. For some women the loss of fertility may mean they have to come to terms with not having children of their own. This can be particularly difficult in education settings. Counselling and emotional support should be made available by employers.

Menopause symptoms in other circumstances

Younger women undergoing treatments for conditions such as endometriosis (estimated to affect around 1 in 10 women of reproductive age) and infertility (affecting around 1 in 7 couples), may experience menopausal symptoms whilst receiving treatment.

Key issues relating to menopause and the workplace

The following issues were raised by NEU members in previous research:

- women aged over 50 do not feel valued in the school/college environment
- women are reluctant to disclose their menopausal status to a line manager
- women do not request reasonable adjustments and when they do they are often rejected
- some women feel that they are subject to detrimental treatment in the workplace because of menopausal symptoms.

Solutions to working through the menopause

- Talk – break the silence on menopause.
- Make menopause a whole workplace issue.
- Identify adjustments that can be made for all workers as well as individual reasonable adjustments.
- Check whether your workplace has a menopause policy – if not, work with workplace reps to introduce one and get it agreed by the governing board.

What steps should schools/colleges take to support workers experiencing the menopause (see leaders' checklist)

The menopause affects people in different ways but there are practical steps that any workplace can take to minimise some of the most common symptoms.

Hot flushes/daytime sweats

- Discuss ways to cool the working environment/access to open windows/fans etc.
- Provide access to cold drinking water.
- Provide facilities for staff to shower or change during the day.

Heavy or irregular periods

- Have arrangements as part of a whole school/college policy for workers to take toilet breaks during lesson time.
- Provide sanitary products in workplace toilets.
- Provide a place for workers to shower and change if necessary, during work hours.

Psychological issues

Many leaders and line managers in schools/colleges may be unaware of some of the temporary psychological issues relating to the menopause, which can include:

- depression
- anxiety
- panic attacks
- mood swings
- irritability
- problems with memory
- loss of confidence

Menopause policies and practice in school/college need to take these symptoms into consideration. (See leaders' checklist).

How the menopause affects different people¹

The menopause affects women in different ways. This section gives some examples of how certain groups of people (including some with different protected characteristics) may experience the menopause.

Older women

Older women bring experience, competence and creative strategies to the classroom. But they are at greater risk of capability procedures. Older women can be seen as an easy target because they tend to be more expensive. A previous survey of teachers revealed that women teachers over the age of 50 are most likely to face capability procedures.

¹ The menopause in the workplace – A toolkit for trade unionists – Wales TUC Cymru 2017

Older women are more likely to have caring responsibilities for elderly or sick parents or partners and are more likely to experience other age-related ill health themselves. These experiences can be exacerbated by significant menopause symptoms.

It is important that workplaces are flexible enough to support older women teachers so they are not disproportionately targeted on capability grounds. Such treatment could amount to sex, age and/or disability discrimination.

Pre-existing conditions, disabled women and the menopause

Many women report that the menopause seems to make existing health conditions worse, triggering or coinciding with a flare up of symptoms. An existing health condition may also worsen symptoms of the menopause.

Women report a wide range of conditions that can be affected by the menopause including: arthritis, multiple sclerosis, mental health conditions, skin conditions, diabetes, hyperthyroidism, chronic fatigue syndrome and many others. If a woman has an existing condition that is worsened by the menopause, she may need more time off for medical appointments or treatment for that condition.

It is important that the multiple levels of discrimination and barriers often faced by disabled women are recognised and addressed sensitively on an individual basis. Employers should ensure that workplace policies, practices and environments are flexible and inclusive enough to

accommodate additional needs that disabled women experiencing the menopause may have and that reasonable adjustments are reviewed to ensure they remain effective.

Black women and the menopause

Research² has found a variation in the average age at which the menopause takes place between women of different ethnic backgrounds. Reporting of the most common and significant symptoms of menopause has also been found to vary among different ethnic groups. It is unclear to what extent these differences are caused by social, economic, language and cultural factors rather than a woman's ethnic origin.

Racism at work can increase work-related stress, which may worsen some menopausal symptoms. Research by the TUC has also shown that Black workers are more likely than white workers to be in insecure work, such as zero hours or casual contracts.

The NEU survey of Black members found³ that many experienced a hostile environment in the workplace, which affected pay progression and their access to continuous professional development. Black women workers in schools may, therefore, feel uncomfortable telling line managers about menopause symptoms in an already hostile environment, even when they are in a secure working environment.

The Wales TUC menopause research with Black women found that a number of those on insecure contracts were reluctant to raise the issue of their menopausal symptoms or ask for adjustments at work, because of concerns that doing so may negatively affect their job security.

² Ozuzu-Nwaiwu, J. (2007) Black women's perceptions of menopause and the use of hormone replacement therapy. www.nursingtimes.net

³ Haque, Dr, Z., Elliott, S., 2017, Visible and Invisible Barriers: the impact of racism on BME teachers The Runnymede Trust /National Education Union

Lesbian, gay and bisexual women and the menopause

Many women report that stress can impact on menopausal symptoms. If women are experiencing homophobia at the same time as symptoms of menopause this can also increase stress, which may exacerbate some symptoms. A TUC survey of LGBT+ workers found that 39 per cent of all respondents have been harassed or discriminated against by a colleague, more than a quarter (29 per cent) by a manager and around 14 per cent by a client or patient.

Women in same sex relationships may have a partner who is going through the menopause at the same time. In some circumstances, this may be positive in terms of increased mutual understanding and support at home.

Sometimes, if both partners are experiencing symptoms such as sleep disturbance or night sweats, this may increase tiredness and fatigue for both partners. It may also be more difficult if both partners experience symptoms such as depression or mood swings at the same time.

Trans workers and the menopause

Transgender, non-binary and intersex workers may also experience the menopause. Employers and senior leaders should be aware of and sensitive to this. A TUC survey of LGBT+ workers (2019) found that 48 per cent have experienced bullying or harassment at work. Such negative attitudes in the workplace can make it difficult for workers to disclose menopause status and/or ask for adjustments.

Transgender workers may be affected by menopause symptoms due to the natural

menopause or treatments and surgeries. Some trans people may not wish to disclose their trans status to their employer and as such may not wish to disclose their menopausal symptoms if it would disclose their trans status.

This is why whole workplace arrangements that do not single out individual workers provide a more effective solution to ensuring support for all workers experiencing the menopause.

Trans women (those who identify as female but were assigned male at birth) undertaking hormone therapy will usually remain on this for life, and should generally experience limited 'pseudo' menopausal symptoms unless hormone therapy is interrupted or hormone levels are unstable.

Trans men (those who identify as male but were assigned female at birth) will experience a natural menopause if their ovaries remain in place and no hormone therapy has been undertaken. Trans men will also experience menopausal symptoms if the ovaries and uterus are surgically removed (this may lead to premature menopause). Symptoms may be reduced or complicated if hormone therapy (such as the male hormone testosterone) is in place.

How a trans person experiences symptoms later in life may vary depending on the age at which they transitioned and when in time that was (treatments have changed and developed over time).

Menopause - frequently asked questions

Should I disclose my menopause status to my line manager if my working conditions are exacerbating the symptoms?

You don't have to disclose your menopause status to your line manager if you don't feel comfortable doing so. However, if you wish your employer to make a reasonable adjustment in order to reduce the impact of your working conditions, you will need to provide the employer – or someone acting on the employer's behalf – with sufficient information to carry out that adjustment.

One way of avoiding the need for specific disclosure is to seek to collectivise the issue so that it is not just about what one woman is experiencing. Discussing the issues with other women colleagues, including those who have gone through the menopause and those who have not yet started, can help to make the menopause a mainstream issue. Many of the practical workplace changes that can make life more bearable for menopausal women will also benefit others, (see section below). A decent workplace for all is essential as it avoids stigmatising individuals.

- If there is a workplace health and safety committee, why not seek to include the menopause as an item on the agenda, with a view to inclusion of the menopause in the school health and safety policy?
- If you raise the issue with your NEU branch secretary or health and safety adviser, the menopause could be included as an agenda item at local authority or academy trust health and safety committees.

Where menopause symptoms are particularly severe, to the extent that the condition would be classed as a disability, the disclosure of the effects to a line manager will enable reasonable adjustments to be negotiated (see section below – Can the Menopause be classed as a Disability? and the NEU's 'Making Work Fit' (neu.org.uk/advice/making-work-fit))

Can I ask for adjustments in the workplace relating to hormone replacement therapy?

You may ask for adjustments in the workplace relating to HRT.

Many women find HRT helpful for alleviating symptoms, but it is not suitable or appropriate for all women. Some women may experience side effects that may also require adjustments in the workplace.

I am experiencing regular hot flushes during lessons. What can I reasonably ask my school to do to help me cope with these symptoms?

Are you able to easily open a window, or windows? If not, request that this be addressed. Ventilation is important for everyone, including children. Leaving a door open may also help.

Are you able to turn down or turn off the radiator(s) in your classroom? If not, request that this be addressed. It will also save energy. As long as the temperature does not drop below 18C, it should be comfortable for all occupants.

Sometimes interpersonal difficulties can arise between colleagues, for example, in relation to what constitutes a reasonable working temperature. In some cases, this may be due to lack of awareness. If the

situation is explained to colleagues, they will have a better understanding. It is the reason why collectivising the issue is helpful to all staff in the workplace.

Window blinds can also help in classrooms that do not benefit from shade.

It is also helpful to keep chilled water in the nearest fridge and have it to hand during lessons.

I am experiencing heavy periods and bladder problems that mean that I need ready access to toilet and washing facilities. This is difficult for me as I cannot simply walk out of my class. What do you suggest?

Requesting a classroom in close proximity to a toilet may, or may not, be feasible. If short periods of informal cover can be arranged between colleagues, that may be the best option. If not, and the need is acute, a formal arrangement may need to be agreed with management. A supporting note from your GP may be helpful in this respect, if you are comfortable about disclosing.

If I take sick leave that is menopause-related, should I declare that this is the reason why I am off sick?

There is no requirement to be so specific either on a doctor's note or when self-certificating. The symptoms of the menopause, which may affect the ability to work: insomnia, incontinence, bladder infections, fatigue due to night sweats are not exclusively menopause-related. You may, therefore, prefer not to include unnecessary detail.

I am finding it hard to work full-time due to the severity of my menopause symptoms, which leave me exhausted. What rights do I have in these circumstances?

If you feel that some form of temporary or permanent reduction in your hours would assist, it is worth putting in a request. Where the nature, length and severity of your symptoms means that you could be classified as disabled, this will strengthen your case (see question below).

Can the menopause be classed as a disability?

The menopause does not itself amount to a disability, but your condition might meet the legal definition of disability if its effects have a substantial and long-term adverse effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

For the purposes of the Equality Act 2010 "substantial" means neither minor nor trivial.

"Long-term" – means that the effect of the impairment has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least 12 months, or is likely to last for the rest of the life of the person affected, or has not lasted 12 months, but is likely to recur.

"Normal day-to-day activities" include eating, washing, walking and going shopping.

Even if your condition does not amount to a disability, you should be supported by your employer.

What should I do if symptoms attributable to the menopause start to affect my performance at work?

In the vast majority of cases, the menopause is unlikely to have a negative impact on work performance, especially if reasonable adjustments are made when needed. However, you should be proactive in seeking support by identifying barriers to your continued success (ie, the lack of adequate ventilation, or access to cold drinking water.

You should not wait to be threatened with capability procedures before doing so. If you believe your concerns are not being taken seriously, you should set them out in writing to your head teacher/principal so that if the matter is later disputed, there is clear evidence that you notified your employer of your condition and of the barriers at your workplace, which made it difficult for you to cope. [neu.org.uk/policy/capability](https://www.neu.org.uk/policy/capability)

What should I do if I believe that the reason for me being placed on capability is because of the temporary problems I am experiencing as a result of the menopause?

Contact the NEU AdviceLine at once: Telephone 0345 811 8111 or [neu.org.uk/advice](https://www.neu.org.uk/advice) for further information.

Management at my school is 'macho' and male-dominated, meaning there is no climate of openness about the menopause and women are afraid of admitting to anything that could be seen as a sign of weakness by management. What can we do about this?

This is all about changing the culture of the workplace.

While the NEU can of course support individual members through casework, changing the culture of a workplace requires a collective response and engagement from all staff.

This could involve:

- Raising concerns at union meetings;
 - putting items on the agenda for staff meetings and health and safety committee meetings
 - asking staff governors to raise the profile of the menopause at governor meetings
 - pressing for ventilation, temperature control, access to cold water and access to toilet and washing facilities for all staff.
- Appointing a 'champion' (preferably someone in senior management) to promote awareness of various conditions within the school/college, including the menopause.
- Encouraging staff to form a workplace peer support group or setting up a mentoring or buddying scheme to encourage women to share experiences, tips and overcome any barriers.

Futher resources

More detailed advice on related issues can be found in the following:

NEU guidance documents:

- **NEU guidance on sick leave/pay:**
neu.org.uk/advice/teachers-sick-pay-and-sick-leave-entitlement
- **NEU model disability leave procedure:**
neu.org.uk/advice/reasonable-adjustments-work
- **NEU guidance on women's health and safety:**
neu.org.uk/advice/womens-health-and-safety
- **NEU guidance 'Making Work Fit'**
neu.org.uk/advice/making-work-fit

Resources from other organisations:

- TUC Guidance on Supporting Women through the Menopause:
www.tuc.org.uk/resource/supporting-working-women-through-menopause

www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Menopause%20survey%20report%20FINAL_0.pdf
- The Menopause Exchange Newsletters:
www.menopause-exchange.co.uk/
- Education Support Partnership
www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk

- 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
thebms.org.uk

Support for premature menopause
www.daisynetwork.org.uk

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

Henpicked, Menopause in the Workplace
menopauseintheworkplace.co.uk

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

Talking Menopause
www.talkingmenopause.co.uk

Menopause Matters
www.menopausematters.co.uk

Menopause Support
menopausesupport.co.uk/

Meg's Menopause
megsmenopause.com/menopause/

See the **NEU menopause toolkit** for further advice and information
neu.org.uk/menopause