



## Factsheet: Work and the Menopause in the UK

For most women the menopause is a natural phase in a woman's life that can have significant impacts on her physical and mental well-being.

ONS data (Oct–Dec 2024) shows there were 16.37 million women in employment across all age groups and about one-third of these are in the 45–60 range.

As an estimated 5.46 million women in the UK are currently perimenopausal or menopausal, understanding how menopause affects work is essential for both employees and employers.

This factsheet highlights key aspects of menopause in the workplace, including its impact, legal considerations, and best practices for supporting employees.

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### 1. What is Menopause?

For most women, the menopause is a natural biological process marking the end of a woman's menstrual cycles.

- Menopause is a milestone that happens when a woman has not had a menstrual period for one year. The average age for a woman to reach menopause is 51, and generally happens between the age of 45-55
- Menopause is a continuum that includes three stages: perimenopause, menopause and post menopause. The perimenopause, the period leading up to menopause, can last for several years and often begins in a woman's 40s.

- Menopause can happen earlier, and this is called premature or early menopause.
- The menopause can also happen if a woman has had medical treatment like having her ovaries removed, breast cancer treatment, chemotherapy or radiotherapy.
- The impact is physical, psychological and emotional. All women experience symptoms, some more than others.

**Common menopause symptoms include:**

- Hot flushes and night sweats
- Fatigue
- Mood changes (e.g., anxiety, irritability)
- Sleep disturbances
- Memory problems and brain fog
- Joint and muscle aches
- Loss of motivation

These symptoms can vary in severity and duration, and many women continue to experience some symptoms for several years post-menopause.

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## 2. Impact of Menopause on Work

The symptoms of menopause can significantly affect an employee's work life in several ways, including:

**Physical Impact**

- **Hot flushes and sweats:** Can cause discomfort and embarrassment, particularly in environments that lack temperature control.
- **Sleep disturbances:** Result in fatigue, reduced concentration, and lower productivity.

- **Memory and cognitive function:** Symptoms such as brain fog may affect an individual's ability to recall information or focus on tasks.

### **Mental Health Impact**

- **Mood swings:** Irritability, anxiety, or depression are common and may affect relationships with colleagues.
- **Confidence:** Some employees may feel embarrassed or lack confidence in discussing their menopause symptoms at work.

### **Performance Impact**

- Reduced productivity due to physical and mental fatigue.
- Absenteeism caused by severe symptoms.
- Challenges in completing work tasks effectively due to cognitive symptoms like memory issues.

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## **3. Legal Rights and Protections**

In Northern Ireland, employees experiencing menopause-related symptoms are protected under **Equality Law**, but there are some notable differences from the rest of the UK. Employers must be mindful of the following legal frameworks:

### **Health and Safety at Work (NI) Order 1978 (Amended 1998):**

- While this doesn't specifically highlight menopause, employers are generally required to assess and manage risks to the health and safety of their workers, and this would include considering factors that may impact the well-being of female employees, including those experiencing menopause.
- Employers must adhere to **health and safety legislation** to ensure that menopause symptoms do not compromise an employee's safety at work. For instance, if symptoms such as dizziness or fatigue make it unsafe for an employee to work in certain environments, the employer must carry out a risk assessment and make necessary adjustments.

### Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976 (Amended):

Prohibits discrimination based on sex, including against women experiencing menopause.

- **Sex Discrimination:** Similar to the rest of the UK, menopause is considered a gender-specific experience, and women are protected against sex discrimination under the **Equality Act (Northern Ireland) 2010**.
- If menopause affects an employee's ability to do their job, they cannot be treated less favourably than other workers. For example, denying menopause-related accommodations could lead to claims of sex discrimination.

### Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 (Amended):

- This prohibits discrimination based on disability. Conditions linked to menopause may be considered an 'impairment,' requiring reasonable adjustments.
- Be aware that menopause could be considered a disability if its symptoms have a **substantial and long-term effect** on day-to-day activities.
- **Reasonable Adjustments:** In such cases, employees who experience significant menopause symptoms may be entitled to reasonable adjustments, such as access to a cooler working environment or more frequent breaks. This is essential to ensure employees are not put at a disadvantage due to their health condition.

### Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (NI) 2006:

This prohibits discrimination based on age, encompassing issues related to menopause.

Although menopause primarily affects women over the age of 40, the issue of **age discrimination** can intersect with menopause. Under the **Regulations** workers are protected from discrimination based on age.

This includes assumptions that older women are less capable or productive due to menopause. Employers should ensure that age-related biases are not influencing how menopause is managed in the workplace.

### Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998:

Imposes a duty on public authorities, including employers, to consider positive action, advance equality of opportunity, foster good relations, and eliminate unlawful discrimination.

### Sick Leave

- Employees may need to take time off work due to menopause symptoms. Employers must ensure menopause-related absences are not treated unfairly and should be covered by sick leave policies that allow for reasonable time off.

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## 4. Supporting Employees with Menopause

Employers should take a proactive approach to support employees experiencing menopause by making reasonable adjustments, fostering a supportive environment, and ensuring a clear, non-discriminatory policy.

### Creating a Supportive Culture

- **Encourage open dialogue:** Encourage employees to talk openly about menopause symptoms. Confidentiality should be maintained, and HR should offer support to those who wish to discuss their symptoms or request accommodations.
- **Menopause awareness training:** Provide training to line managers and HR teams so they can identify menopause symptoms and support employees effectively.

### Workplace Adjustments

Adjustments may be needed to help employees manage menopause symptoms:

- **Temperature control:** Provide fans, air conditioning, or flexible workspaces to help manage hot flushes.
- **Flexible working:** Offer hybrid working options or flexible hours to accommodate disrupted sleep patterns.

- **Frequent breaks:** Provide more frequent breaks, especially for those who need time to cool down or rest.
- **Task modification:** Adjust workload or deadlines if cognitive symptoms are impacting performance.
- **Health support:** Offer access to wellbeing days, Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), and counselling services to support mental health.

### Policy Development

Employers should ensure they have menopause-specific policies in place. This should include:

- Provisions for flexible working arrangements.
- Clear guidelines for workplace adjustments.
- Procedures for discussing menopause symptoms confidentially.
- A zero-tolerance approach to discrimination or harassment related to menopause.

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## 5. Best Practices for Employers

To ensure a supportive environment for employees going through menopause, employers should consider the following practices:

- **Menopause Awareness:** Promote menopause awareness in the workplace by educating both managers and staff about menopause and its impact.
- **Confidential Support:** Ensure line managers and HR are equipped to have sensitive conversations with employees. If preferred, allow employees to discuss their concerns with another manager or HR representative.
- **Flexible Working:** Offer flexible working hours or hybrid working arrangements to support employees experiencing disrupted sleep patterns or fatigue.

- **Clear Communication:** Ensure employees know how to request support or adjustments, and encourage an open, supportive atmosphere.
  - **Regular Check-Ins:** Keep the conversation ongoing. Regular check-ins ensure any adjustments are still effective and that employees feel supported.
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## 6. Conclusion

Menopause is mostly a natural life event, and its symptoms can have significant effects on employees' wellbeing and work performance.

In Northern Ireland, employers must ensure they adhere to the relevant legislation to protect employees from disability, sex and age discrimination.

By implementing supportive policies, offering reasonable adjustments, and fostering a menopause-friendly workplace culture, employers can help their staff navigate this life stage with dignity and respect.

Employers should provide clear channels for support, ensure flexibility where necessary, and remain proactive in ensuring menopause does not adversely affect an employee's career progression, health, or wellbeing.