The menopause revisited

Summer is coming (hopefully)... a time when some of the symptoms of the menopause can feel worse.

Read on for some useful ways of managing it

This newsletter revisits the topic of the menopause, as more of our staff, or the partners of our staff, have entered this natural phase of their lives over the past year. It focuses on how to manage menopausal symptoms, especially in the heat if travelling abroad (or if our summer comes back).

It also discusses some of the implications for staff working through this natural part of female ageing whilst at work. However, it does not discuss hormonal replacement therapy.

Women who are beginning to, or are in the middle of, experiencing it, will relate to the following observation:

“Menopausal symptoms can pose major and embarrassing problems for some women, leaving them feeling less confident and at odds with their desired professional image.”

The menopause usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age, although it can occur any time up to the mid-60s, with an average age for women to reach menopause at around 51 years.

2,500 women working in the Trust are over the age of 50, so the menopause maybe affecting the working lives of a significant number of our workforce. How best to manage, potentially reduce and hopefully minimise the impact of symptoms can be a daily struggle. Our understanding and respectful recognition of this natural part of female aging can positively help to make each day the best it can be for those experiencing unpleasant symptoms, especially as many may not wish to discuss them at work.

Overview

Menopausal symptoms can begin months or even years before periods stop and last around four years after your last period, although some women experience them for much longer (eight years or upwards).
Most women will experience menopausal symptoms; some of these can be quite severe and have a significant impact on everyday activities, including working life. However, it doesn’t have to be a nightmare, and learning how to tackle hot flushes, night sweats, mood changes and disturbed sleep can all help alleviate the worst of them: [www.menopausematters.co.uk](http://www.menopausematters.co.uk)

**Diagnosing the menopause**

If menopausal symptoms are affecting your everyday life you should see your GP. Your GP should be able to tell you if you are in peri-menopause or menopause based on your age, symptoms and how often you have periods, so you are unlikely to need tests. You may be offered a blood test which measures the follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) if you are between 40-45 years of age and have menopausal symptoms or are under 40 and your GP suspects you are in the menopause.

FSH is found in higher levels in menopausal women. However you should not be offered this test if you are taking a contraceptive containing oestrogen and progesterone or high dose progestogen because the contraceptive changes your natural FSH level:

[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23/ifp/chapter/About-this-information](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23/ifp/chapter/About-this-information)

**Symptoms**

![Image of menopausal woman]

About 30-60% of women experience intermittent physical or psychological symptoms as oestrogen levels fall:

- tiredness
- poor concentration and memory
- low confidence
- hot flushes
  - 20-25% have troublesome hot flushes which can cause embarrassment; these are often related to specific stressors such as: a hot or poorly ventilated workplace; formal meetings; high visibility moments e.g. presentations; learning new procedures; and tasks requiring an attention to detail
- palpitations
- night sweats which can be so severe bedding becomes soaked in sweat
- difficulty sleeping and fatigue as a result of worrying thoughts and/or night sweats
- low mood or anxiety
- loss of bone density.

For more symptoms visit: [www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause)
If you have been diagnosed with early menopause visit: www.daisynetwork.org

**So what are the coping strategies that many women try out to ease the symptoms either whilst at work or at home?**

**Adjustments to work environment**

If those you work with are supportive this can make a big difference. Talk about your symptoms particularly with those who are also experiencing them too. Working out possible solutions with colleagues can create a work environment of acceptance creating a mentally healthy workplace.

**Some useful suggestions**

**Fans**: it is really helpful to have the option of turning on a fan to cool down. You can have your own personal mini fan such as a USB mini fan you can plug into your PC

**Open windows**: maybe ask to move desks to be near one that can open

**Drink cold water from the fridge**: a very effective and immediate support.

**Do your DSE online assessment**: look after your posture if desk-based, and change a vinyl chair to a cloth one

**Use technology when helpful**: ‘Notepad’ to jog your memory, diary reminders

**Apps such as Headspace**: to help you regroup, or listen to Mindfulness clips on the intranet home page

**Adjustments to work routines**

**Discuss your practical needs** with your line manager, HR or another manager you feel comfortable talking to: past surveys revealed that 70% of staff had not had a conversation with their line manager.

**Take your breaks**: ask yourself ‘how am I?’ and ‘what do I need to do to help myself be the best I can be?’ Listen to your body and mind. In your break, get outside and take some deep breaths, notice your surroundings and stay in the moment – maybe have a healthy snack like a banana.

**Take your annual leave**: look at what you do while off work and try to build in some mental and physical ‘me time’ to focus on what is important to you

**Try to avoid doing overtime**: particularly when symptoms are at their peak

If your manager knows, perhaps they can help with formal adjustments such as flexible working.

**General adjustments**

**Avoid ‘triggers’**

Hot flushes can occur for no apparent reason (the drop in oestrogen is to blame, though the exact mechanism is not fully understood). You may have hot flush ‘triggers’ such as alcohol, hot drinks or spicy foods, so try and avoid them.
Manage your thoughts as a hot flush happens
Be kind to yourself and reassure yourself that it will pass if you go with it: don’t focus on it and try and cool down using one of the options above.

Try to control your emotions
Harder to do than to say, but don’t give up trying. Hold back, so you respond rather than react. Remember, you don’t have to believe everything you think and you just need a bit of time to compute that! Count to ten to calm yourself and clear your thinking.

4-7-8 breathing is a super technique which can be practised a few times a day to lower anxiety levels and can reduce ‘red button’ outbursts

Learn Mindfulness and practise it at work: there is growing evidence that mindfulness-based stress reduction can reduce the severity of hot flushes.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and, to a lesser extent, clinical hypnosis have been shown to be effective in reducing hot flushes. CBT for anxiety and stress focuses on the links between physical symptoms, thoughts, feelings and behaviour. The way we think about symptoms in certain situations tends to affect how we feel and what we do, and these reactions can in turn increase intensity of bodily reactions.

This is a useful fact sheet on CBT: www.womens-health-concern.org/help-and-advice/factsheets/cognitive-behaviour-therapy-cbt-menopausal-symptoms

Positive reinterpretations
We all have a ‘thinking bias’, and, if you are feeling particularly vulnerable and stressed, you will tend to have your ‘fall-back bias’. People often focus too much on the negative, so always ask: ‘How helpful is what I am thinking?’ ‘How might someone else interpret what has just happened?’ Ask a trusted colleague to help you, before you go into a spiral of negativity.

Stop, think, breathe and recognise your habitual reactions: check with others then change the way you are thinking to a more helpful interpretation.

Try to see the funny side, to support your emotional wellbeing.

Menopause Matters is a good source of support: www.menopausematters.co.uk

Layers of clothes
Wear several layers so you can peel them off and save embarrassment if a sudden hot flush just happens. Carrying a mini fan in your handbag, plus a cool towel, can help the body cool down.

Spare clothes at work are useful if you become drenched.

Compensatory strategies
Some people avoid taking on challenging tasks at work as it can feel like the best way of managing the ‘foggy brain’ that can be so infuriatingly symptomatic. In the short term it can give you time to regroup mentally, however, only if in that time you develop a plan of how to approach the task. The plan can include problem-solving it with others, or breaking it down into bite-sized chunks and doing it bit by bit. The important thing is to keep trying to remain engaged. Reward your efforts at each stage. Menopause can undermine your confidence and reduce your certainty. Just remember ‘Everyone needs help sometimes’. This may be your time to ask for it.
Trying to get back to sleep?

- Bedroom at 16 degrees
- Cotton bedding and nightwear, and layers that can be thrown off until you have cooled down
- Avoid viscose in your mattress – look for breathable natural products that can wick away sweat rather than cocoon you by enveloping you in the heat you generate
- Cut out light plus all blue light (banish your mobile, tablet or laptop)
- Use an old-fashioned alarm clock, not your phone, to wake you
- Each time you want to go back to sleep go through the following
  - A progressive relaxation technique
  - 4-7-8 breathing
  - The Cognitive Shuffle (staff who have tried it say this is a fantastic tool)
  - More sleep-focused information can be found in the November 2017 Health and Wellbeing newsletter.

Struggling with weight gain?

Women do describe how much harder it is to keep their weight steady eating the same way they have always eaten and start to gain weight. A few studies have shown that losing weight helps lower the intensity of hot flushes. For advice and information visit:

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Menopause/Pages/Menopausehome.aspx
www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/Menopause.pdf

Our Here for Health Improvement Centres can offer one-to-one advice and information on how to manage your weight or other lifestyle issues.

‘Alternative’ remedies

Source: www.health.harvard.edu/menopause/nonhormonal-treatments-for-menopause

Soy products can alleviate hot flushes, but the degree of relief provided varies widely. However, more studies are needed to better determine the effectiveness

Although several non-hormonal treatments for menopause are often suggested, there is not enough evidence from clinical studies to recommend them. These include lifestyle changes, like getting more exercise or practicing yoga, deep breathing or relaxation techniques.

Nor is there convincing evidence that widely-used herbal remedies like black cohosh, dong quai, ginseng or wild yam are effective.

Other physical changes

Genital changes do occur, and so vaginal tissues become thinner and drier. Two non-hormonal approaches have proven to be effective in relieving vaginal symptoms with further sources of information found below.
Further sources of information

Menopause Matters
www.menopausematters.co.uk

Daisy Network
www.daisynetwork.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do

Healthtalk.org
www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/later-life/menopause/topics

Women’s Health
www.womens-health-concern.org/help-and-advice/factsheets/focus-series/menopause

Menopause Exchange
www.menopause-exchange.co.uk

Your GP

Provided by the Trust

Employment Assistance Programme: information and support for staff on a range of personal issues. Free to use, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Freephone 0800 243 458 | Email assistance@workplaceoptions.com

www.workplaceoptions.co.uk

Centre for Occupational Health and Wellbeing: if it is impacting on your work you can self-refer or have a management referral

Here for Health Improvement Advice Centre: for general lifestyle advice
Email hereforhealth@ouh.nhs.uk

BBC radio and TV programmes over the last year:

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bt4c3m
www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/S4LtT3wQ1LPkfFMZbCNkHCF/nine-tips-to-help-you-cope-with-the-menopause
Other matters

It’s been raining for what feels like forever. Are you struggling to feel positive? Finding it harder to smile readily? Becoming fed-up too quickly?

Research suggests that introducing ‘happy habits’ and integrating them into your everyday life supports your emotional and mental wellbeing. They help you refocus on what is important to you and benefit both you and those around you. Start today and choose a couple of the suggestions below (do track their impact on you).

10 happy habits worth thinking about. Source: www.actionforhappiness.org

- Think positively (glass half full)
- Be your own role model (list three things you like about yourself and refresh these every day)
- Look after yourself (eat less, move more, talk about ‘it’, sleep well)
- Mind your life (focus on the present – learn mindfulness)
- Embrace change (be flexible)
- Manage your stress (prioritise some ‘me time’)
- Develop resilience (take action, don’t beat yourself up)
- Balance your life (people at the end of their lives do not wish they had spent more time worrying rather than they had focused on what was important to them)
- Adopt an attitude of gratitude (mindfully focus on the good bits)
- Make a positive difference (be kind and generous not judgemental or make false assumptions)

Coming soon:

Churchill Healthy Hospital Day – Thursday 25 July 2019

Key themes: healthier eating, increasing physical activity (including several challenges with prizes), managing stress and building resilience (including mindfulness) – do let us know if you have any ideas!

Email: anna.hinton@ouh.nhs.uk

The NHS website offers advice and help on a range of health issues: www.nhs.uk

Please print this newsletter and put it in your staff room.

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