

Menstruation to Menopause – Manager Guidelines

Introduction

Menstruation and menopause are natural stages of life experienced by most women and yet remains a taboo subject in the workplace. The purpose of this guidance is to raise awareness of menstruation and menopause related issues at work and assist managers in supporting employees who are experiencing menstruation and menopause, and their associated symptoms.

Sandwell Council is committed to the wellbeing of its employees and aims to create an environment where women feel confident enough to raise issues about their symptoms and ask for support at work, and where managers feel confident in holding conversations and providing appropriate support.

Women comprise of over half (58%) of the Council's workforce, and 47% of those are women aged over 40. Thus, many of today's women workers are, or will be, working through the menopause and managing associated symptoms at work. Around 75% of women experience some symptoms of the menopause, and 25% could be classed as severe.

Symptoms associated with menstruation and menopause include abdominal or pelvic cramping, irregular periods, lower back pain, bloating and sore breasts, hot flushes, palpitations, night sweats, sleep disturbance, fatigue, poor concentration / memory, irritability, headaches, mood swings, depression and anxiety, skin irritation, loss of confidence and vaginal dryness.

Overall, these periods of hormonal change and associated symptoms can last from early adolescence through to a woman's later years.

Studies show that some women felt the menopause had negatively affected their job performance; including believing that it had a negative impact on their managers and colleagues' perceptions of their competence at work.

Taking a proactive approach to supporting women through menstruation and menopause can ensure that they are able to ask for help and adjustments, so they can continue to be successful in their roles, reduce absenteeism due to associated symptoms, and assure employees that Sandwell Council is committed to providing support during these transitional stages.

Definitions

Menstruation also known as a 'period', is the process in a woman of discharging blood and other material from the lining of the uterus at monthly intervals from puberty until the menopause, except during pregnancy.

Menopause is the natural biological process experienced by most women that marks the end of their reproductive life, most typically occurring between age 45 and 55.

The average age for a woman to reach menopause is 51, however, it can be earlier or later than this due to surgery, illness or other reasons.

Around 1 in 100 women experience the menopause before the age of 40; this is known as premature menopause.

Perimenopause is the time leading up to the menopause when a woman may experience changes, such as irregular periods or the start of other menopausal symptoms.

Postmenopause is the time after menopause has occurred, starting when a woman has not had a period for twelve consecutive months.

How is the menopause diagnosed?

If a woman is over the age of 45 years and has irregular periods and has symptoms of the menopause, there is no need to have a menopause blood test. If a woman is younger than 45 years, then it may be beneficial to have a blood test. The blood test measures the follicle stimulating Hormone in the blood known as the FSH. This may confirm if she is going through the menopause, if unsure advice should be sought from a GP.

Key Principles

Sandwell Council recognises Menstruation and Menopause as Occupational Health issues and will seek to support women during these stages of life.

The council will ensure employees who are experiencing symptoms at work relating to menstruation and menopause are encouraged to discuss their requirements with their line manager.

Working conditions and the work environment will be reviewed to consider the difficulties some women experience during menstruation and menopause and make reasonable adjustments where it is considered necessary.

Sandwell Council will increase awareness and ensure that women and men feel supported and comfortable in discussing menstruation and menopause in the workplace.

Manager Support

Research shows that half of women felt that their job performance had been negatively affected by their menopausal symptoms, with the major impact of their

symptoms being attributed to poor concentration, tiredness, poor memory, feeling low/depressed and a lack of confidence. Nearly a fifth thought that the menopause had a negative impact on their managers and colleague's perceptions of their competence at work which lead to a feeling of anxiety.

Women experience menstruation and menopause in a number of ways. Some women do not need any assistance and do not require any intervention, whilst some women have much more severe symptoms and require medical treatment or support. Each situation is different and there is no standard approach to supporting women at work.

Managers should treat an employee with menstruation and menopause symptoms in the same way as they would manage and support any long-term health condition including making reasonable adjustments.

As with any longstanding health-related condition, sympathetic and appropriate support from employers and managers is crucial to provide employees with the support that they need. Above all, it is important to listen to women and respond sympathetically to any requests for adjustments at work.

Addressing the stigma about menstruation and menopause means challenging negative and stereotypical attitudes. Performance management should be a positive process which focuses on the support needed to help everyone perform to the best of their ability. However, it is important to recognise that some women may not want to discuss menstruation and menopause, and this must be respected.

If an employee's performance is suffering as a result of their symptoms, please consider any support and adjustments that you can provide. If capability issues remain due to their symptoms, then this should normally be dealt with under the Sickness Absence Management Policy.

Similarly, if an employee is having periods of sickness absence as a result of their menstruation or menopause, again, please refer to the reasonable adjustments below to allow them to sustain regular and efficient performance at work.

Workplace Adjustments and Practical Tips

It is good practice to consider making adjustments for any individual experiencing difficulties at work because of menstruation and menopause. Adjustments should be considered in relation to a specific individual and their specific role. Some possible support or adjustments may include:

Flexible Working

Negotiating flexible working hours for employees who are experiencing menstruation and menopausal symptoms can make a big difference in helping those employees continue to work to their full potential. Where the role permits, consider:

- Allowing employees to work around their symptoms, perhaps by allowing them to rest when they are tired and make the time up later.
- Occasional homeworking when symptoms are severe.
- Adjusting start and finish times to account for times of the day when symptoms are more severe – e.g. women with disturbed sleep may find they are more productive with a later start time.

Sleep disruption and/or night sweats

- Consider a change to shift patterns or the ability to swap shifts on a temporary basis.
- Offer a flexible working arrangement, for example a later start and finish time, allow employees to work from home

Hot flushes and/or daytime sweats

- Look at ways to cool the working environment, for example provide a fan, move a desk close to a window or adjust the air conditioning.
- Provide easy access to cold drinking water and washrooms.
- Adapt uniforms to improve comfort.

Heavy or irregular periods

- Provide easy access to washroom and toilet facilities.
- Allow for more frequent breaks to go to the toilet.
- Allow an employee to temporarily work from home if they have very heavy bleeding.
- Allow employees to request extra uniforms if needed.

Headaches and fatigue

- Consider a temporary adjustment to an employee's work duties.
- Provide a quiet area to work.
- Offer easy access to cold drinking water.
- Allow regular breaks and opportunities to take medication.

Muscular aches, and bone and joint pain

- Make any necessary temporary adjustments through review of risk assessments and work schedules.
- Allow someone to move around or stay mobile, if that helps.

Psychological issues (for example loss of confidence, poor concentration, anxiety, and so on)

- Encourage employees to discuss concerns at one-to-one meetings with you and/or Occupational Health.
- Discuss possible adjustments to tasks and duties that are proving a challenge.

- Address work-related stress by carrying out a risk assessment recommended by Health and Safety.
- Signpost to the Council's employee assistance programme.
- Identify a supportive colleague to talk to away from the office or work area, such as a menstruation to menopause champion.
- Allow time out from others when needed, to have some quiet time or undertake relaxation or mindfulness activities.
- Provide access to a quiet space to work or the opportunity to work from home.

Advice on adjustments can be sought from **HR Frontline on 0121 569 3300**, or please visit Menstruation to Menopause on the intranet for more tips on possible support.

Manager Responsibilities

Managers are responsible for:

- Ensuring that no one experiences less favourable treatment as a result of menstruation and menopause.
- Ensuring that any conversations are kept strictly confidential.
- Putting in place any required support / adjustments.
- Recording any agreements made.
- Holding regular dialogue with employees regarding the support required, including follow up meetings to review adjustments that have been made.
- Seeking additional advice from Occupational Health where necessary.
- Signposting to relevant sources of support, such as the Council's Counselling Service.
- Agreeing with the employee if other colleagues should be informed about any adjustments that have been agreed

Managers can contact **HR Frontline on 0121 569 3300** for additional guidance and information where necessary.