



The Menopause is a Workplace Issue

An Advice Guide
for Usdaw Reps



The Menopause is a Workplace Issue

Many Usdaw reps are supporting members who are struggling with menopause symptoms at work.

This short guide is intended to help reps understand more about the menopause, how it affects women* at work and what steps can be taken to make a difference to members in this situation.

Usdaw is clear that the menopause is an occupational health issue. For the majority of women the menopause will have an impact on their physical and mental well-being and the workplace can make these symptoms worse.

Breaking With Tradition

The menopause has traditionally been seen as a private matter or a 'women's issue' and is often not a topic which is discussed openly.

This needs to change, especially for women who are struggling with symptoms at work.

*Throughout this guide we use the term 'women' to talk about people who may experience perimenopause and menopause. In the vast majority of cases this will be women, but we know that it can also impact on trans and non-binary colleagues too. Usdaw is committed to supporting all members who are experiencing symptoms at work.

What is the Menopause and Perimenopause?

Menopause

Menopause is when a woman's periods stop due to lower hormone levels.

You reach menopause when you have not had a period for 12 months.

The menopause usually happens between the ages of 45 and 55 but it can happen to women at a much younger age.

Sometimes women experience an early menopause (before the average age of 51) because they have had surgery or been treated for cancer. Sometimes the reason is unknown. For more information about early menopause please see Usdaw leaflet *Early Menopause* Lft 456.

Perimenopause

The term perimenopause is used to describe the time before the menopause when women are still having periods but will begin to experience menopausal symptoms. The perimenopause can last for up to 10 years before a woman's periods stop altogether.

It is common for menopause and perimenopause symptoms to be missed. Women themselves may not realise their symptoms are menopause related and it is not uncommon for doctors to misdiagnose menopause.



Symptoms of the Menopause

Menopause and perimenopause symptoms can have a big impact on our women members whilst they are at work.

Symptoms are both physical and psychological.

The most common symptoms include the following, but there are many more symptoms and every woman's experience of the menopause will be different:

- Hot Flashes.
- Night sweats.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Low mood or anxiety.
- Problems with memory or concentration.
- Muscle and joint aches.
- Exhaustion.
- Loss of confidence.
- Headaches.
- Breathing difficulties.
- Depression.

Some women will experience no or very few symptoms but for the majority of women working whilst going through the menopause or perimenopause is challenging.

So much so that research shows 1 in 4 women have thought about giving up their job because they found it so difficult to cope with the menopause at work.

Just over half of women have reduced their hours at work because of the menopause.

Nearly 1 million women have been forced out of the labour market due to menopausal symptoms.

Almost 1 in 10 women have been disciplined at work because of the impact menopause was having on them.

If women get the right support at work this loss of hours and income would probably not be necessary. Women are trying to manage their symptoms and cope with a natural, but often difficult, process and what happens at work can make this much more difficult, or easier to cope with.

Sickness Absence is a Big Issue

If women need time off work because of their symptoms more often than not they feel unable to tell their manager the real reason why they are off work.

A TUC survey found that over 4 out of 10 women who had taken sickness absence due to the menopause had not felt able to tell their manager the real reason for their absence.

This is a problem for Usdaw reps representing women who may be being disciplined for absence but who don't feel able to share the real reason why. This means many of our members will be being disciplined for absence related to the menopause.



It's No Joke

Why do so many women feel unable to talk about that their symptoms are due to the menopause or perimenopause? Over half of Usdaw women members have told us they don't feel comfortable approaching their manager if they are experiencing menopause symptoms in the workplace.

There are several reasons for this.

There is still a lot of stigma surrounding the menopause; it's viewed as a time when a woman is no longer fertile, is growing old and is therefore seen as less attractive than before.

We live in a society which judges women on their physical attractiveness. A young woman is seen as having a higher value than an older woman.

Women may worry about being seen as weak and as if they can't cope at work.

In many workplaces the menopause is treated as a joke. Making jokes can be a way of coping or easing embarrassment but it can undermine how seriously this important issue is taken. Being laughed at and made fun of doesn't help women to feel they can speak up. Jokes can be a gendered form of ageism and make women feel embarrassed, humiliated and upset.

Many companies have removed in-store personnel and HR people and women tell us that they just don't feel comfortable approaching young male managers, who often seem solely focused on the needs of business and have little or no understanding of what the menopause is.



Workplace Factors

There are a range of workplace factors that can make managing symptoms of menopause or perimenopause more difficult for Usdaw members. These include:

- The temperature and ventilation of the workplace.
- The material and the fit of the staff uniform, if there is one, and whether it might make staff going through the menopause feel too hot or cause discomfort.
- Whether there's somewhere suitable for staff to rest if needed, for example a quiet room.
- Fluctuating working hours including working early morning or late night shifts.
- Rigid performance related targets.
- Whether toilet facilities are easily accessible.
- Whether cold drinking water is available.
- The attitude of managers to women working through the menopause.
- Heavy lifting, manual handling and standing for long periods of time.
- Working in a customer facing role.

Udaw has produced a Talking Toolkit, see page 8 of this leaflet for more information, that can be used to go through step by step what workplace adjustments women working through the menopause might need.

Some of the changes Usdaw reps have negotiated to support women during this time include:

- Sitting at the checkout nearest to the door to help with hot flushes.
- Having extra breaks if needed.
- Starting work later in the day to help with sleepless nights.
- Having a quiet area in the staff canteen where women can go if they need to cool down or rest.

Pauline, a rep working in retail in the North East Region, recently represented a member who was struggling with tiredness and low mood at work due to the menopause.

"The member had been off sick for quite a while and was worrying about the absence policy. Also she was finding work really hard especially as she worked full-time. I suggested her symptoms might be due to the menopause and offered to help her try and get a change to her hours."

Pauline supported the member to use the Right to Request Flexible Working to get her hours changed to allow her more time to rest. This was eventually agreed by management and the member has returned to work and had no further menopause related sickness absence.

What Does the Law Say?

Where a woman is experiencing severe symptoms and these are having a 'substantial effect' on her ability to carry out day to day activities, she may well fit the definition of a disabled worker as outlined in the Equality Act (or Disability Discrimination Act in Northern Ireland).

She would have to show that she has been experiencing symptoms that adversely affect her ability to carry out daily activities for at least 12 months (or that her symptoms are likely to last that long). If she does fit the definition of a disabled worker her employer falls under a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments not only to the workplace, her job duties and working hours, but also to their own policies and procedures, like absence and performance policies.

Whilst many women working through the menopause are unlikely to experience symptoms severe enough to fit the legal definition of a disabled worker, it is worth bearing this in mind. For more information about the rights disabled workers have under the Equality Act (or DDA in NI) see Usdaw leaflet *Supporting Disabled Members* Lft 383.



Raising the Issue in the Workplace

As well as supporting members working through the menopause, reps have also found ways to raise the issue in their workplace including:

- Running a menopause workplace campaign. This is a good way of letting members know they can talk to the Union and of getting management on board. You can order a menopause workplace campaign box from equalitymatters@usdaw.org.uk or by speaking to your local Usdaw office. We will send you everything you need, including leaflets, posters and free 'giveaways'.
- Talking to members and non-members about the campaign. You could hand out the Usdaw menopause survey and use the results to talk to management about the issues in your workplace for women working through the menopause. Surveys can be a good way of collecting information from members in confidence, particularly on issues that some members may not feel comfortable talking about openly in the workplace. The survey can also be completed online at: www.usdaw.org.uk/menopausesurvey

If you wanted to do something quick and easy you could cover the Union noticeboard in your workplace with menopause campaign information.

The menopause is a health and safety issue and Usdaw reps play a vital role in making sure our members are safe and healthy at work.

Most women say that the menopause has a negative impact on them at work and the working environment often makes menopause symptoms worse. This means there is a lot of scope for reps to make a difference to women and there are some relatively easy to win and low cost adjustments that can really help women.

Usdaw has produced a Menopause Talking Toolkit to help and guide reps who are supporting women working through the menopause. You can find this on the Usdaw website: www.usdaw.org.uk/menopause

The Talking Toolkit can be used to guide a conversation with a woman member because it focuses on the workplace issues women are experiencing rather than their symptoms. It can help get the process started with an open conversation. This should help members feel more at ease and therefore more likely to inform you of the full extent of their work difficulties. After the conversation, you will have built up a picture of their workplace issues and can take the actions forward with the employer to look at possible adjustments that will support the member at work.



Scan to complete
the survey today

If you are an Usdaw health and safety rep you can also use body mapping to better understand menopause in your workplace. Body mapping is a technique where a group of workers come together to identify shared health problems and think about causes and solutions in the workplace. Starting with the outline of a body on a large sheet of paper members use stickers and coloured pens to highlight whereabouts on the body they are having menopause

symptoms. It's a visual and fun way to start a conversation about the menopause. You can find out more about body mapping in the Usdaw leaflet called *Body Mapping - Telling Where it Hurts*.

Some reps have run menopause listening sessions in their workplace, bringing women together over tea and cake to discuss symptoms and how the workplace can worsen or alleviate these.



Further Information

Balance

A safe space to learn about all things perimenopause and menopause through evidence-based information and knowledge.

web: <https://www.balance-menopause.com/>

The Daisy Network

A support group for women with premature ovarian insufficiency.

web: <https://www.daisynetwork.org>

Menopause Matters

An independent website providing up-to-date, accurate information about the menopause, menopausal symptoms and treatment options.

web: <https://www.menopausematters.co.uk/>

NHS

Menopause help and support from the NHS.

web: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/help-and-support/>

QUEER/LGBTQIA+ MENOPAUSE

Menopause resources for LGBTQIA+ people.

web: <https://www.queermenopause.com/resources>

Women's Health Concern

Confidential advice, reassurance and education about the menopause.

web: <https://www.womens-health-concern.org/>

More Information

Usdaw Nationwide

Wherever you work, an Usdaw rep or official (Area Organiser) is not far away. For further information or assistance, contact your Usdaw rep or local Usdaw office. Alternatively you can phone our Freephone Helpline **0800 030 80 30** to connect you to your regional office or visit our website: www.usdaw.org.uk

You can also write to the Union's Head Office. Just write **FREEPOST USDAW** on the envelope and put it in the post.

Join Usdaw

You can join online at:
www.usdaw.org.uk/join



Scan to
join today

What Happens Next

Once we process your application, you will receive a membership card with our Helpline telephone number and a New Member's Pack giving details of all the benefits and professional services available to you.

