



Menopause & the Workplace

STUC Womens' Committee: January 2018

The STUC Womens' Committee launched a survey on menopause in the workplace at the 90th STUC Women's Conference in Glenrothes in October 2017. This is an interim report on the survey results which will inform the Committee's work in the coming year.

Most women go through the menopause between the ages of 48 and 55, and symptoms can last for over ten years. The average age of menopause in the UK is 51, but it can happen much earlier.

According to the Scottish Government, there has been a 5.5% increase in the employment rates of women aged 50 - 64 in Scotland since 2008.

With this increase of women in the Scottish workforce, and with 63.9% of women in Scotland between 50 and 64 in employment, more are now working through and beyond the menopause.

Ongoing research shows that the menopause has a direct impact on women in the workplace, and that particular health and safety implications can arise.

Advice on menopause-related issues and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) rarely includes work-related problems, yet women have raised numerous issues and challenges around the menopause with their union, and it is clear a lack of understanding and resources is having a detrimental impact on their health.

The survey was designed to investigate the experiences of women in the workplace; how Scottish employers are responding to this issue; and what resources the STUC Womens' Committee can develop for women regarding menopause in the workplace.

Survey Results

3,649
survey respondents

56%

said they are currently experiencing the menopause, nearly 3% said they are supporting someone going through the menopause, and the rest were either likely to experience menopause in the future or are post-menopausal.

99%

of respondents either don't have or don't know if they have a workplace menopause policy.

32%

said menopause was treated negatively in the workplace.

63%

said the menopause has been treated as a joke at work.

50%

said that the gender of management influences whether they feel comfortable talking about menopause at work, although around 65% said they generally feel comfortable talking about it at work..

95%

said they would welcome a model policy on dealing with menopause at work developed by the STUC Women's Committee, and almost the same number would welcome training.

Survey Comments

Many respondents commented that they believe that men at work either don't feel comfortable talking about menopause, are embarrassed about it, or don't understand enough about it to equip them to talk about it.

Others commented that they themselves would feel uncomfortable talking about it, rather than the manager.

However, other respondents noted that women at work may also find it hard or uncomfortable to talk about menopause if they have not yet experienced it themselves, or did not have any particularly negative experiences with it.

When asked how menopause can affect working life, respondents answered with the following examples:

"Temperature changes in workplace and having to take time out to deal with health issues"

"Increase in anxiety caused significant difficulties with many aspects of work."

Hot flushes can result in frustration, discomfort and distraction. Heavy periods can necessitate clothing changes/trips home."

"Having a hot flush in an office which is already uncomfortably warm and not having access to a fan or being able to open a window. Menopausal insomnia has meant I have taken days off work as I couldn't function."

"Had to stop doing procedures due to sweat running down my arms."

"I had extreme bleeding and this was a major issue at work for me."

"Get too hot and struggle to concentrate sometimes."

"Lack of sleep."

"Very heavy bleeding makes you tired. Sitting in long meetings, one may "flood" or feel that one is doing so. Hot flushes can also be embarrassing."

"For many people like me there are very serious physical disturbances such as chronic migraine, hot flushes, mood swings (due to hormonal imbalances) heavy and persistent bleeding, fatigue, night sweats, interrupted or difficult sleep."

"You can have very irregular heavy bleeding, so requiring frequent toilet breaks at very short notice. Other medical issues may arise during this time requiring hospital visits for, for example, fibroids and other auto immune conditions."

"Having undergone a radical hysterectomy last year at the age of 42 I have crashed into severe early menopause. The surgery has left me with physical gynaourinary problem. I have extreme pain, anxiety and insomnia. As a teacher I am struggling and it is not recognised."

“In 2009, I had treatments for breast cancer which cured the cancer but the medication pushed me prematurely at aged 49 into the menopause. As a new lecturer I had a very hard time as my memory was affected and I had to give up SVQ Assessing and go down from full-time to part time in 2010 as I was not as cognitively active as before. I hope this work helps women who go through menopause at any stage as it is quite debilitating.”

“The menopause is such a unique experience for each woman. I had a forced menopause as in my forties I had a large number of cysts and I had to have a hysterectomy, ovaries and cervix removed. I need HRT - I can't function or live my life without it. HRT has side effects. I suffer from fatigue

and each day can be a struggle to get through. Poor sleep, sweats. My blood pressure is high and I get headaches. My memory and ability to learn has been affected. This affects my confidence hugely.

The menopause sadly generates all the stereotypical jokes in the workplace, which is sad in this day and age. I'm sure many men are living with the impact of the menopause and know more about it that they let on. I think everyone needs to be more aware of menopause and how this can affect individuals. Of course some women go through the menopause with very little or no impact. I'm very envious of that.”

Policy Suggestions

Irregular sleep patterns and fatigue: **flexible working.**

Increased sick days can trigger absence disciplinarys: **reasonable adjustments.**

Mood swings can impact on productivity levels both for the individual and people around them: **advice, awareness raising and support for menopausal women and colleagues via training.**

Long and heavy periods: **ability to work from home where possible.**

To cool body temperatures down if needed: **quiet areas and access to fans in the workplace.**

‘Brain fog’ can affect performance, but no account is taken of this either in performance reviews or assessment centres for promotion: **reasonable adjustments to policies.**

The STUC Women's Committee will now collate menopause policies and information from affiliate unions and members' workplaces in order to develop a best practice model for distribution.

For more information on the survey, and to be kept up to date with this area of work, please contact the STUC at info@stuc.org.uk