

Human Resources  
Goireasan Daonna

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# Supporting Women's Health in the Workplace Guidance

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## Introduction

This guidance supports an inclusive working culture by removing any stigma and taboo surrounding women's health at work. This guidance will help to create an environment where employees are able to talk about their health and practical needs.

One in 3 employees will experience a women's health problem at some point in their lives. It is acknowledged that for some people the symptoms they experience during these natural stages of life can have a direct impact on their ability to perform their job role and remain at work. It has been recognised that providing the right support to employees to manage this period in their life may enable them to cope better with their symptoms and allow them to remain healthy and safe at work.

Employees experiencing women's health conditions require the same support and understanding from their employer as anyone experiencing any ongoing health condition. It has been recognised that working conditions and environment may exacerbate an employee's symptoms. This guidance isn't about creating a one-size fits all approach, it is about highlighting all of the different ways in which an employee can be supported when they experience symptoms. This means that different levels of support and assistance may be needed on an individual basis.

Additional support may also need to be considered in respect of front line employees or those who work outdoors.

Supporting women's health in the workplace plays an important part in retaining an experienced, talented and skilled workforce. When support is not provided, it can directly impact productivity, absenteeism and team morale.

## Guidance

### Definitions

#### **Dysmenorrhea**

This is another name for extremely painful periods.

## Endometriosis

This is a condition where tissue similar to the lining of the womb grows in other places, such as ovaries and fallopian tubes.

## Osteoporosis

This is a health condition that weakens bones, making them fragile and more likely to break. It develops slowly over several years and is often only diagnosed when a fall or sudden impact causes a bone to break (fracture).

## Premature or early menopause

This is when menopause occurs before the age of 40 (premature) and if between 40 and 45 it is called early menopause.

## Perimenopause

The 'perimenopause' is the phase leading up to the menopause, when a person's hormone balance starts to change but before periods stop for good. It can cause a wide range of symptoms, both physically and mentally. As a result of these hormonal changes, many individuals experience both physical and emotional symptoms which are typically experienced for several years. They are said to have reached the menopause when they have not had a period for a year. The symptoms last on average for 4 years, but for some can last much longer.

## Menopause


Menopause is a natural biological stage of life when a person's ovaries no longer produce eggs and as a result the levels of 3 hormones, oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone fall and periods cease. As menopausal symptoms are typically experienced for several years, it is best described as a 'transition' rather than a one-off event. A person is described as in menopause when they have not had a period for 12 consecutive months or more. The menopause typically happens between age 45 and 55, but for some employees it can be much earlier or later.

**Post-menopause** is the time after menopause has occurred.

**Menopause transition** refers to the different stages – perimenopause, menopause and post-menopause.

## Medical menopause

It is important to note that a number of treatments to alleviate women's health symptoms can result in medically induced menopause. These treatments cause a



person's ovaries to stop functioning before menopause would normally occur. It happens much faster than natural menopause and often causes more severe symptoms. The effects can be temporary or permanent, depending on the treatment and the extent of damage to the ovaries.

**Chemical menopause** is a temporary (and reversible) treatment that involves a class of medications called gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) agonists. These are drugs which act to suppress ovulation and the production of the hormone's oestrogen and progesterone. GnRH may also be used to treat conditions like irregular or heavy menstrual bleeding and endometriosis.

**Surgical menopause** occurs when a person's ovaries are surgically removed (oophorectomy) or after a radical hysterectomy (removal of the uterus, ligaments around the uterus, and the upper 1/3 of the vagina). Menopause symptoms occur immediately after removal of the ovaries which can be problematic for those individuals involved.

## Women's Health Conditions


### Menopause

While this document predominantly refers to women in relation to menopause, the Council recognises and appreciates that menopause can impact transgender, non-binary and intersex people in the same manner. In line with this recognition, the same guidance, support and flexibility within this policy should be provided.

There is still often a stigma around the menopause and consequently people going through it will often try to hide their symptoms or be uncomfortable talking about them. We want everyone to understand what menopause is and to be able to talk about it openly, without fear or embarrassment and it is, therefore, an important issue for everyone, not just those experiencing the symptoms of it.

There could also be situations where you notice some changes in an employee's behaviour, e.g. starting work later or being more quiet than usual. It is important not to make assumptions about their wellbeing or ask them a direct question as to whether they have menopausal symptoms.

### Symptoms of Menopause



Employees will have differing experiences of menopause and for some this may cause particular difficulties both in and out of work, which may impact on their ability to perform at work. Highland Council recognise this can be a challenging time of life and can be compounded by other issues such as increasing caring responsibilities and perhaps the onset of other age related health conditions.


The menopause can cause a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms that can last for several years. The majority of menopausal employees will experience symptoms, but everyone is different. Symptoms can fluctuate and be felt to varying degrees. Experiencing any of the typical symptoms can pose a challenge for employees as they go about their daily lives, including work. It is important to note that not every woman will notice or experience every symptom, or even need help or support.

Some of the most typical symptoms of the menopause include:

- psychological issues such as mood disturbances, anxiety or depression, memory loss, panic attacks, loss of confidence and reduced or poor concentration
- hot flushes (brief and sudden surges of heat usually felt in the face, neck and chest and often require fresh air to relieve)
- insomnia or sleep disturbance that can make employee's feel fatigued and irritable
- night sweats (hot flushes that happen during the night)
- irregular periods or periods that become light or very heavy
- muscle and joint stiffness, aches and pains
- recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs) including cystitis
- headaches
- weight gain
- palpitations (heartbeats that become more noticeable)
- skin changes (dryness, acne, general itchiness)
- reduced sex drive
- hair thinning/loss

## **Endometriosis**

There is still often stigma and ignorance of the symptoms of Endometriosis. Endometriosis is a condition that is known for being difficult to diagnose and treat. Some women are badly affected, while others might not have any noticeable symptoms.



Endometriosis is a painful condition where tissue similar to the lining of the womb grows in other places, such as ovaries and fallopian tubes. It grows in places where it doesn't belong and the tissue acts as the lining inside the uterus would – it thickens, breaks down and bleeds. This can lead to the surrounding tissue becoming irritated and inflamed and causes scar tissue or adhesions to form in the pelvic region. These can cause pelvic tissue and organs in that region to stick to each other. There is no known way to prevent Endometriosis. It is the second most common gynaecological condition in the UK and will affect around 1 in 10 women, typically between puberty and menopause. Therefore, any symptoms tend to emerge during a woman's most active working years.

The Highland Council has committed to raise awareness of Endometriosis and wants everyone to understand what it is and be able to talk about it openly to enable those suffering with the disease to have the confidence and trust to discuss their condition with their manager and seek appropriate support.

### **Symptoms of Endometriosis**

Symptoms can appear at any age, whether earlier or later on in life and can include:

- abdomen/pelvic and lower back pain which is usually worse before and during ovulation or menstruation or both
- abnormal menstrual flows, excessive bleeding or bleeding in between periods
- pain with bowel movements or urination
- gastrointestinal problems including sickness, constipation and diarrhoea which can be mistaken for IBS (irritable bowel syndrome)
- sleep disturbances which may impact energy levels
- feelings of depression
- pain during or after sex
- difficulty in conceiving

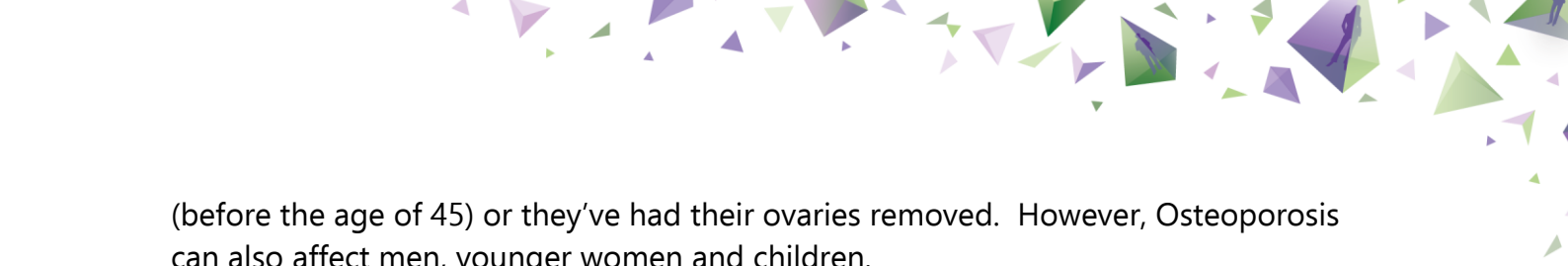
Women who suffer from endometriosis may need to undergo treatment to induce either chemical menopause or surgical menopause.

### **Osteoporosis**

Losing bone density is a normal part of ageing, but some people lose bone much faster than normal. This can lead to a condition called Osteoporosis and an increased risk of broken bones.

Women also lose bone rapidly in the first few years after the menopause. Women are more at risk of Osteoporosis than men, particularly if menopause begins early





(before the age of 45) or they've had their ovaries removed. However, Osteoporosis can also affect men, younger women and children.

With more people choosing to remain in work for longer, a greater number of the workforce may be living with this condition. More than 3 million people in the UK are estimated to have Osteoporosis. One in 2 women and one in 5 men will have an Osteoporotic fracture in their lifetime.

There is no cure for Osteoporosis and you cannot reverse bone loss but you can stop further bone loss and also reduce the risk of injury. One of the key recommendations for living well with Osteoporosis relates to exercise and in particular weight bearing and strength training activities.

Osteoporosis is painless unless bones break (fracture) but fragile bones may break easily without too much force.

### **Symptoms of Osteoporosis**

The following can be signs or symptoms of Osteoporosis:

- lower back pain can be caused by broken or collapsed bones in the spine and is a common cause of long term pain
- broken bones of the wrist and hip are the most common injuries in people with osteoporosis, however, breaks can also happen in other bones, such as the arm or pelvis.
- height loss and curvature of the spine can result from compression fractures and may present as a stooping posture
- shortness of breath may occur where compression on the discs in the spine reduce lung capacity.

If an employee thinks they might be at risk of Osteoporosis or they feel they have broken a bone too easily, they should speak to their GP or another healthcare professional.

There are a number of things which can be done to keep bones strong and prevent fractures:

- maintain a healthy, balanced calcium rich diet which gives bones their strength and hardness
- take adequate vitamin D – this helps their body to absorb and use calcium
- maintain an appropriate body weight
- avoid smoking
- drink alcohol in moderation



- lead an active lifestyle, do more exercise and keep moving, which is important for bone health as it helps to strengthen both muscle and bone, leading to fewer broken bones and it improves balance, so slips, trips and falls are less likely.

## Roles & Responsibilities


### Employee Responsibilities

Employees are responsible for understanding their responsibilities within this guidance and the related policies. Employees should ensure they:

- take care of their own health and safety and that of their colleagues or any other person they may come into contact with whilst at work
- are aware of this guidance and any associated policies, particularly those which relate to [Attendance Management Policy & Guidance](#) and the [Special Leave Policy](#)
- provide medical evidence if they are absent from work because of their health
- seek medical advice from their GP or medical professional to discuss any treatment options and ensure that any medical advice and treatment received is followed
- consider any reasonable adjustments which may support them in continuing in work or returning to work
- check with their GP or pharmacist as to whether any prescription or over-the-counter medication may impair their ability to perform their duties
- inform their line manager of any symptoms which may affect their ability to attend work or undertake the duties of their post, particularly with regards to any health and safety implications
- are open and honest in conversations with their line manager about discussing their practical needs to proactively find mutually acceptable adjustments
- attend any related medical appointments and co-operate fully with the Occupational Health service and any other organisations that provide support
- be aware of the resources available through the [Employee Assistance Programme](#)
- contact HR where further advice is required, by emailing [hr@highland.gov.uk](mailto:hr@highland.gov.uk)

### Manager Responsibilities

We recognise that every employee's experience will be different and therefore, it is not feasible to set out a structured set of specific guidelines. We have found that the way



you approach a conversation relating to women's health can help the employee feel more able to speak openly and can strengthen trust in the working relationship.

It is important to recognise that some individuals may not want to discuss their health or their symptoms. However, if an employee does wish to have a discussion or just to talk about how they are feeling, the more supportive and knowledgeable you are about the range of symptoms, the more likely your employee will feel able to approach you.

Managers should consider how confident they feel about their employee's wellbeing, particularly where they do not see them often due to the nature of their work or because they have agile working arrangements. Regular and informal one-to-ones between a manager and their team members (whether in person or virtually) can provide an opportunity for a conversation about any changes to their health situation. Where it is difficult to have regular in-person catch-ups, managers should ensure their employees know how they should be contacted to discuss any wellbeing concerns they may have.

If an employee needs professional help, they should speak first to their doctor or a member of their healthcare team.

Managers should ensure they do not discriminate against employees on the grounds of sex. It is therefore important that female employees who are experiencing women's health related concerns are properly supported and that reasonable adjustments are considered where appropriate.

Remember that many employees who are suffering with women's health problems may choose not to tell their managers about their symptoms and may be reluctant to disclose the real reason for any sickness absence. It is up to an employee as to whether they disclose any particular symptom or health issue they may be experiencing.

Sometimes performance and behaviour may change without any clear explanation. If you have concerns about a team member's performance, ask general questions such as 'How are you?' or 'I have noticed that you have been late to work recently, and I wondered if you are ok.'


Line managers should ensure they:

- have read this guidance and are able to apply any related policies (for example, the [Attendance Management Policy](#) or [Special Leave Policy](#)) to

ensure inclusion and provide a consistent, fair and timely approach when supporting any health concerns.

- raise awareness of women's health across the workforce to enable employees to feel confident in asking for support and discussing their health issues and symptoms with you
- create a culture where all team members feel comfortable talking about the impact of women's health in the workplace, regardless of their age or gender
- approach any conversations with sensitivity, appreciating the personal nature of the symptoms and discuss any supportive measures or adjustments which may be required
- create a confidential space and time for an employee who wishes to discuss their health concerns with you
- actively listen to the employee, provide support and advice and signpost to the support mechanisms available within the council, including the [Employee Assistance Programme](#) and any additional external resources
- take a flexible approach to any requests which will enable the employee to continue in work
- consider any reasonable adjustments where it has been identified that there is a requirement for additional support
- make a record of any agreed adjustments and actions to be implemented and ensure that these are adhered to
- obtain the relevant medical evidence from an employee when they are absent from work
- record every occasion of absence accurately in MyView
- refer employees to Occupational Health where further advice is required
- maintain regular contact with an employee, on an agreed basis, to see how they are, or if their health has changed
- discuss any health and safety concerns or requirements of the job
- discuss any concerns regularly as part of ERD process
- inform the employee that they may be accompanied by a work colleague or trade union representative to any meeting
- contact the HR Attendance Support Officer (ASO) for further advice or clarification ([hrattendancesupport@highland.gov.uk](mailto:hrattendancesupport@highland.gov.uk))
- monitor facilities to ensure access to toilet facilities, drinking water and an appropriate working temperature is achieved (Note: extreme weather is out-with the council's control). For those not working in an office environment, availability and access to alternative toilet facilities will need to be considered
- ensure obligations relating to the [Equality Act 2010](#) and [Health & Safety at Work Act 1974](#) are fulfilled for all employees.

Managers should be aware that partners or family members of those employees who are experiencing significant physical or psychological symptoms may also be



indirectly affected, and this in turn may impact on their own performance at work. In these circumstances, the partner or family member may also experience disrupted sleep and fatigue, anxiety or stress. Supportive conversations with those employees and signposting to sources of information/support may be useful.

## Discussing Women's Health with an Employee

### Confidentiality

If an employee tells you about their health condition, it should be treated as confidential.

If they want information about their condition to be shared, consent must be explicit. You should discuss with them who will be told and by whom, as well as the information they do or do not want shared with colleagues.

Women's Health concerns can affect people's confidence and it can be really daunting talking to someone who has no knowledge of their condition or symptoms, so the more open, supportive and knowledgeable you are, the less embarrassed they are likely to be to talk about how their condition is affecting their health and work. Awareness of women's health and associated symptoms and the range of internal and external support available will increase your own confidence in your discussions.

As with any sensitive conversation, setting the right tone is important. Approach any conversations with empathy and try not to be embarrassed. Here are some tips to consider:

- to ensure confidentiality, make sure you are in a private space and are able to avoid interruptions or arrange a mutually agreeable time if meeting via Teams
- allow enough time for the conversation to take place – do not rush
- welcome the employee and put them at ease by asking simple, open, non-judgemental questions
- maintain good eye contact during your chat
- actively listen and carefully encourage the employee to open up, but be prepared for some silences
- give the employee ample opportunity to explain what is going on for them in their own words
- focus on the person and not the issue at hand
- ask the employee what support they want and suggest ways in which they can be supported
- avoid making assumptions or being prescriptive

- agree any actions and how these will be implemented
- ensure any written documentation or record is treated as confidential and is stored securely
- ensure that designated time is allowed if a follow up meeting is required.

## Reasonable Adjustments

The purpose of considering reasonable adjustments is to enable an employee experiencing any women's health symptoms to continue to remain in work and undertake their job. Any adjustments should consider both the employee's needs and any service requirements. It is very important, therefore, that a manager involves the employee in discussions to understand the barriers the employee is experiencing and the potential adjustments that could help to mitigate the impact of any women's health symptoms at work. Any adjustments should be considered for all employees regardless of their work location e.g. for those working in a hybrid or remote location.

The diversity of roles and working environments across the Council may provide challenges to implementing some adjustments e.g. having time away from others could be more difficult to achieve in certain work areas. However, this highlights the importance of the manager having a supportive discussion with the employee to ensure all possibilities are explored and to consider all suggestions the employee may have.

The implementation of any adjustment would be agreed between the individual and the manager as part of their discussion. Some adjustments may need more planning than others.

The following provides options of adjustments that may be considered however, this is not exhaustive:

- capacity to rearrange formal meetings or presentations if needed
- allowing the employee to switch to different tasks on days their wellbeing is impacted
- allowing the employee to take additional breaks where needed including being able to briefly access fresh air and return without having to explain
- allowing the employee to work flexible hours or from home, where that is reasonably possible, considering the needs of the service
- temporary change to an employee's work pattern or shift
- part time working or reduced hours
- later start or earlier finishing times
- support to leave work if they are feeling unwell or experience heavy bleeding or flooding

- time off for medical appointments in line with the [Special Leave policy](#) provisions
- access to restroom facilities

## Other considerations in the workplace

Whilst it is acknowledged that the council offers a diversity of roles to employees across the workplace and working environments differ depending on the role being undertaken, discussion around individual needs may result in consideration of providing additional facilities which may include:


- provision of an additional or alternative uniform or PPE
- adjustments to uniform or PPE to support managing symptoms subject to risk assessment (e.g. use of natural fibre garments)
- provision of a space or area for employees to use to make a telephone call for professional support or take medication
- provision of time to walk around to ease joint pain
- facility to store sanitary products, etc.
- easy access to fresh drinking water
- use of a fan, working near a window, or away from a heat source
- time away from others or quiet time
- review of workload and discussion around loss of confidence or low mood/poor concentration

Remember, to signpost the employee to the [Employee Assistance Programme](#).

## Disability and Women's Health

Whilst the menopause, endometriosis or osteoporosis are not in themselves a disability, the symptoms arising from these conditions may meet the definition of an 'impairment' under the Equality Act. As an example, depression or urinary problems linked to the women's health may have a substantial and longterm adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day to day activities, means that the person concerned would be considered to have a disability under the Act. An employer is therefore, required to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that there is not a disadvantage.

## Transgender, non-binary and intersex employees and the menopause



We recognise and value the diversity of our employees and the importance of an inclusive culture. We are aware people of diverse gender expressions and identities experience menopause and it is therefore not just an issue for female colleagues.

Transgender, non-binary and intersex employees may experience the menopause either due to age-related hormonal changes or hormone treatments and surgeries. It is important to acknowledge some trans, non-binary and intersex colleagues may not wish to disclose their trans or intersex status. It can therefore be particularly difficult for these employees to access support or ask for adjustments.

Within each of these groups, people's needs will be different and so it is crucial to listen to people on an individual basis and enable them to take the lead in their own conversations and required adjustments.

## Legislation

Under the [Equality Act 2010](#), employers have a duty not to discriminate on grounds of sex, age and disability and employees should be treated with respect in terms of their age and gender. As the menopause and endometriosis are predominantly female conditions, any detrimental treatment of a woman related to this could represent direct or indirect sex discrimination.

### Some examples of discrimination are:

- Inappropriate comments about people of a certain age and hot flushes could be harassment on the grounds of age, sex and disability.
- Issuing a performance warning to a team member where the reason for the performance issues is connected to experiencing menopausal symptoms could be indirect sex, age and / or disability discrimination.
- Issuing an absence warning to a colleague whose absence is connected to menopause symptoms could be indirect age, sex and / or disability discrimination.
- Failing to enable a team member experiencing heavy periods to take additional toilet breaks could be disability discrimination and also possibly indirect sex discrimination.

The [Health and Safety at Work Act 1974](#) requires employers to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, safe working practices for their employees. The Highland Council has a duty to make an appropriate assessment of the workplace risks to ensure the health and safety of their employees. This includes identifying groups of workers who might be particularly at risk as they experience women's health



concerns. Completing and acting on [risk assessments](#) for those employees should ensure that any hazards are removed or proper control measures are put in place to reduce the risk.

## Additional Support Groups

Endometriosis UK run support groups across Scotland providing a safe space for those suffering from Endometriosis to come together and share experiences. There are also various resource materials available on the [Charities web site](#).

### **NHS information**

[NHS - Menopause](#)

[NHS - Early Menopause](#)

[NHS - Endometriosis](#)

[NHS - Osteoporosis](#)

### **NICE guidelines on 'Menopause: diagnosis and treatment'**

NICE guidelines provide advice on the care and support that should be offered to people who use health and care services. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23>

### **Menopause Matters**

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

[www.menopausematters.co.uk](http://www.menopausematters.co.uk)

### **Women's Health Concern**

A charitable organisation – the patient arm of the British Menopause Society – that aims to help educate and support women with their healthcare by providing unbiased, accurate information.

[www.womens-health-concern.org](http://www.womens-health-concern.org)

### **Daisy Network**

Daisy Network is dedicated to providing information and support to women diagnosed with Premature Ovarian Insufficiency, also known as Premature Menopause.

[www.daisynetwork.org](http://www.daisynetwork.org)

### **The Menopause Exchange**

The Menopause Exchange gives independent advice about the menopause, midlife and post-menopausal health. They send out a free quarterly newsletter with useful impartial help and support.

[www.menopause-exchange.co.uk](http://www.menopause-exchange.co.uk)

### **Menopause Cafés**

At a menopause café people, often strangers, gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss menopause. The website includes guidance on how to set up your own menopause café.

[www.menopausecafe.net](http://www.menopausecafe.net)

### **Manage my Menopause**

Website for tailored menopausal advice for individuals provided by experts.

[www.managemymenopause.co.uk](http://www.managemymenopause.co.uk)

### **My Menopause Doctor**

A website that aims to help empower women with necessary information to make informed decisions regarding any treatment they may take to help turn the menopause into a positive experience that does not negatively impact their lives.

[www.menopausedoctor.co.uk](http://www.menopausedoctor.co.uk)

### **Apps**

This free app allows you to track your symptoms, access expert content, share stories in the community and much more [www.balance-menopause.com](http://www.balance-menopause.com)

# Quick Links

The Hyperlinks listed here will redirect you to the related guidance, letters, information, and relevant organisations mentioned in this policy.

<b>HR Microsite</b>	<a href="#">Click Here</a>
<b>Attendance Management</b>	<a href="#">Click Here</a>
<b>Employee Assistance Programme</b>	<a href="#">Click Here</a>
<b>H&amp;S Menopause Support</b>	<a href="#">Click Here</a>
<b>ERDs</b>	<a href="#">Click Here</a>
<b>Flexible Working Arrangements</b>	<a href="#">Click Here</a>
<b>Bullying &amp; Harassment Policy</b>	<a href="#">Click Here</a>
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	<a href="#">Click Here</a>
<b>Special Leave Policy</b>	<a href="#">Click Here</a>



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