

Managing menstrual and reproductive health in the workplace

This resource, containing education and practical tips around menstrual and reproductive health, is aimed at senior-level leaders. It will help them create changes in policy and practice that will lead to a happier and more productive workforce. Beth Clarke, Kirsty Carotti, Katy Corfield and Isobel Vernon-Avery of the WISE Young Professionals' Board produced this document.

Introduction

This document aims to provide guidance and information around menstrual and reproductive health to help senior leaders support and empower people in their organisation. The suggestions include how best to improve awareness, change policy and provide training for leaders and managers.

Increasing awareness of menstrual and reproductive health is vital to improving gender diversity in their workforce. In a survey of over 900 people aged 45-55, 48% reported having difficulties in managing work during the menopausal transition and over 40% said that menopausal symptoms affected their job performance. Menstrual and reproductive health complications also affect a large proportion of the UK workforce. One in 10 people with a uterus and of reproductive age suffer from endometriosis and about 1 in 8 pregnancies end in miscarriage.

Sadly, according to this INVolve study, 60% of FTSE 100 companies still don't have menopause support guidance or policies.

Creating Change

Building awareness of menstrual and reproductive health and creating practical solutions to support staff suffering from related issues is essential. Here we outline three key ways of doing this.

1. Build awareness of these issues by encouraging colleagues to become allies and advocates, this will help break down taboos.
2. Leverage practical solutions to ensure people feel comfortable at work, this will help reduce worry and stress associated with these conditions.
3. Create a plan of action and new policies to help managers provide the right level of support for their direct reports.

Below are a series of practical solutions, educational tools and policy changes that organisations can adopt to support menstrual and reproductive health.

Practical Solutions

- Provide free period/sanitary products in all bathrooms and discrete disposal options.

Example: HMRC provide free sanitary products in all female and unisex bathrooms.

“This is another positive step towards making HMRC a great place to work, where we prioritise the wellbeing of our colleagues and people are treated with empathy, dignity and respect”.

- Doctors and occupational health workers should be educated on reproductive health topics to ensure they provide the correct care for menstrual and reproductive health conditions.
- Gynaecology referrals should be made available through the employer healthcare policy.

Example: After Roe v Wade was overturned in the US, Google and Amazon pledged to relocate employees requiring abortion or gynaecological care.

- One in seven couples in the UK (NHS UK) are affected by infertility. As such, providing fertility support is an excellent way of supporting employees.
- Mental-health referrals or therapists available through the employer healthcare policy are vital as reproductive health conditions can impact both physical and mental health.

Example: Channel 4 provides a counselling service for employees as an explicit part of their Menopause Policy, alongside wider healthcare support.

- Handouts and posters covering reproductive healthcare conditions and associated healthcare needs are important. Raising visibility and reducing the stigma associated with these conditions can be a great help too.
- Educational programmes such as manager training, toolkits, menopause awareness month and online campaigns can empower women and men to support each other at work. It is important that managers receive proper training to support all employees.

Example: The Menopause Pledge is bringing menopause to the forefront of menstrual and reproductive health at work. Several high profile organisations have signed up including Rolls Royce.

Shell has a Menopause Cafe - a virtual space to drop in and share thoughts and experiences around the menopause. The outcome is to build community, share information and improve awareness.

Thames Water and Arup have each held Menopause lunchtime talks to discuss challenges, impact on work and build support between people.

- Create a section dedicated to reproductive and menstrual health on the intranet that is easy to find and regularly updated.
- Become a WISE Ten Steps signatory and benefit from case studies and a bespoke workshop to help you provide a holistic approach to gender equality encompassing menstruation and reproductive health.

Policy Change Areas

- **Compassionate Leave** this should be provided after the loss of a baby (miscarriage and abortion) irrespective of the gestational age. Employees should not be required to take holiday or registered sick leave to process this loss.
- **Menopause and Perimenopause Policy** - Experiencing the menopause and perimenopause is different for everyone, it is important that there are flexible treatment options as well as easy accessibility to care and advice. Include cover in healthcare plans for private consultations, diagnostic tests and clinical advice on managing symptoms, medication and overall wellbeing.
- **Flexible Working** - Many reproductive and menstrual conditions are debilitating. People who suffer from these conditions are often forced to take sick leave as they are unable to manage symptoms while on site/in an office. Introducing Menstrual Leave policies, allowing people to work from home or providing office space if an employee cannot be in an operational areas will help to support staff.
- **Shared Parental Leave** - There is currently a big discrepancy in parental leave in many organisations. Societal stereotypes can mean many women feel pressured to stay at home and look after their baby, with some never returning to work due to lack of support from employers. Owing to prohibitive childcare costs many women choose to leave their jobs and stay at home full time, as returning to work would result in financial loss.
 - It is common for expectant parents to save up as much annual leave as possible to spend time with their new-born, the WISE YPB argues that this is not ideal in the following [blog](#).

Summary

Many people continue working despite their reproductive health-related challenges. Implementing changes like those listed above would lead to a more inclusive work environment, thereby allowing **all** employees to thrive. When staff feel more cared for and included, they are more likely to be happy in their role and thus work more effectively and stay with the organisation for a longer period. The benefits of retaining staff are plentiful, including the retention of knowledge and skills and the reduction of financial costs related to recruitment and absence.

Background Information

Menstrual and reproductive health encompasses a number of events and conditions that are experienced by people throughout their lives, including (but not limited to):

- Pregnancy
- Periods and menstruation
- Menopause and perimenopause
- Conditions caused by hormone imbalances (e.g. PCOS)
- Miscarriage and baby loss
- Fertility complications
- Abortion
- Endometriosis

This does not just affect cis women, but also people in the transgender, gender-fluid and non-binary communities. The conditions covered are physical conditions that relate to specific pieces of anatomy, such as the uterus and ovaries.

Members of the WISE Young Professionals' Board have experienced first-hand issues related menstrual and reproductive needs not being acknowledged by their employer. Some have had to walk long distances across large industrial sites to get access to a bathroom for their gender, causing additional stress during a period or pregnancy. Others have experienced unpleasant comments regarding menstruation and menopause and felt first-hand the impact of a lack of appropriate facilities for women, such as available places to dispose of sanitary products.

Our experiences are not unique. A 2019 survey showed that menstrual and reproductive health challenges caused more than three million people to leave employment, costing businesses valuable talent. It is well known that Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) employers face ongoing skills shortages and improved gender diversity can help them widen their talent pool. By implementing better practices around menstrual and reproductive health in your organisation, you can retain a more diverse workforce and create a more inclusive environment that support people of all genders.

Case Study - Thames Water

Thames Water is a private utility company in the UK, providing public water supply and waste treatment to 15 million people in the London region.

Thames Water launched the Menopause Project last year to help employees share experiences and support each other. Menopause is now included in the organisation's health and safety moments at the start of meetings and within wellbeing moments in smaller team settings. Thames Water has also signed the UK's Menopause Pledge. In addition, company policies have also been adjusted to provide mores support - the Employee Assistance Scheme is one example. Schemes like this are vital, as by 2030 1 in 3 UK workers will be over 50. The average menopause age is 51 meaning related issues will affect a higher proportion of the working population than ever before.

You can read more about the Thames Water Menopause Project case study [here](#).

Further Reading and Resources

For more information on issues discussed in this resource, please visit the following sites:

1. [28 Days ish](#) is a BBC podcast that looks at the history of women's health.
2. [Bloody Good Period](#) aims to work with organisations to provide period products to those who cannot afford or access it.
3. [Endometriosis UK](#) provides vital support services, reliable information and a community for those affected by endometriosis.
4. [The Menopause Charity](#) helps people understand the mental and physical changes that occur during perimenopause and menopause and provide them with tools and treatments to help them manage.
5. [Menopause at Work](#) is a research-based, free, open access suite of resources to help workplaces support menopausal transition.
6. [Miscarriage association](#) provides information and support for people affected by miscarriage, molar pregnancy or ectopic pregnancy.
7. [LGBT Foundation](#) is a national charity delivering advice, support and information services to lesbian, gay, bisexual and Trans (LGBT) communities.
8. [Retaining Women in STEM: The Question of Paternity Leave](#) is an article written by the WISE YPB about paternity leave in the workplace.
9. [Menopause Pledge](#) is a public pledge employers can sign to demonstrate their commitment to improving awareness around menopause.
10. [WISE Diversity and Inclusion Tool](#): This Diversity & Inclusion Assessment Tool pinpoints areas for improved gender balance within your business.
11. [The WISE Ten Steps](#): become a WISE signatory for access to best practice and bespoke help to improve gender equality in the workplace.
12. [The High Commissioner for Human Rights statement on menstrual health.](#)
13. [The World Health Organisation's statement on menstrual health and rights.](#)
14. [A BBC discussion on menstrual leave.](#)