
Menopause at Work

Support Guide for Managers



What is the most important thing in the world? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata. It is the people, it is the people, it is the people. People, and their experiences, are at the heart of the University community.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of people in the University community being healthy and well is reflected in the Te Pae Māhutonga holistic approach to wellbeing outlined on the [Healthy Campus](#) webpage. Staff experiencing menopausal symptoms require the same support and understanding as those experiencing any other health condition. Menopause need not be an awkward or embarrassing topic and often small changes can make a world of difference to people, enabling them to undertake and enjoy their work. Managers play an important role in supporting the wellbeing and engagement of staff within their team and this includes the support of people as they transition through menopause.

The University Canterbury generously gave permission to use content from *Ruahinetanga: Menopause at Work Support Guide for Managers* when preparing this resource. This guide refers to “people” experiencing menopause because, whilst often seen as “women’s experience”, menopause can affect people from transgender, non-binary and intersex groups as a result of hormonal changes. However, some of the research has been undertaken with women only, which indicates the scale of menopause impact is even more extensive.

2. THE ROLE OF MANAGERS

Why is it important that managers understand what menopause is, the impact it can have, and the support they can provide?

- a) It is about people and the core University values include Manaakitaka/Respect (equity, understanding and kindness) and Whakawhanaukataka/Community (engage, collaborate, encourage). These values guide how we work and learn together as members of the University community. Support for people experiencing menopause includes practical measures as well as enabling people to feel able to talk openly if they want to - without stigma or embarrassment.
- b) Demography highlights the scale of this experience. Many women working at the University are in the menopausal age range. In a recent study of people across 5 countries, 62% of women who experienced menopausal symptoms said that this impacted them at work, with 44% saying they felt too embarrassed to ask for support¹. In many instances women struggle to manage symptoms and need to take leave in order to manage symptoms such as recurrent hot flushes, insomnia or loss of confidence. Around 80% of women will experience noticeable symptoms and

¹ Cited in [Menopause Toolkit. Vodafone \(2021\)](#) p.4

nearly 50% of these women will find their symptoms difficult to manage². Research in 2019 identified that more than 1 million women in the UK left a job because of menopausal symptoms³. If people leave this impacts on colleagues and the organisation in terms of loss of knowledge and productivity as well as recruitment costs.

- c) The Health and Safety at Work Act (2015) requires employers to provide a safe work environment as far as is reasonably practicable and this includes managers making reasonable adjustments to accommodate health conditions such as menopause.

3. STEPS MANAGERS CAN TAKE

First, learn more about what menopause is, when it happens and how it can affect people.

- a) Menopause is a natural process. It is a time of transition as oestrogen levels decline. It occurs across a wide age range, with many people experiencing symptoms between the ages of 45-55 years. Symptoms may be physical, cognitive, emotional and social with a duration, on average, of 4-10 years. Symptoms can fluctuate. For some people there are positive aspects of menopause. For other people the impact presents significant challenges at home, work and study.
- b) Understand some of the common symptoms that can be experienced by a person moving through menopause. Be aware that each individual will experience menopause differently.

Common symptoms that may be encountered include the following.

- Psychological issues such as mood disturbances, anxiety and /or depression, memory loss, panic attacks, loss of confidence and reduced concentration
- Hot flushes (brief and sudden surges of heat)
- Fatigue (sleep disturbance can make people feel tired and irritable)
- Night sweats (hot flushes that happen during the night interfering with sleep)
- Irregular periods and /or periods can become light or heavy
- Muscle and joint stiffness, aches and pains
- Recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs) including cystitis
- Headaches
- Weight gain
- Palpitations (heart beats that become more noticeable)
- Skin changes (dryness, acne, general itchiness)

² [Supporting employees through the menopause BUPA \(2021\)](#) p.5 citing The menopause at work: guidance for line managers. CIPD (2019)

³ [How to manage the menopause at work, Linney, A \(2019\)](#)

- c) Find out about the resources to support staff such as [Employee Assistance Programme](#) from Benestar. Share this information with staff. EAP includes counselling/coaching for permanent/fixed-term full time staff and part-time with 0.5FTE or more with employment contracts totalling 12 months or more. There are online resources available to all staff on payroll at the [BeneHub](#) site. These include information on life, sleep, nutrition, and other topics. To access the website for the first time people use the company id: *uniotago* and token: *eap* and then create an account using their email address and password. More information and resources are listed in Appendix 1.

4) HOW MANAGERS CAN SUPPORT PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENOPAUSAL SYMPTOMS?

Supporting staff as they experience menopause is crucial. Effective management will help improve team morale, retain valuable skills and reduce sickness absence.

Simple tips that can make a world of difference.

- Building relationships based on trust, empathy and respect will make it easier for people to feel comfortable about raising health issues, including the menopause.
- Regular one-to-one meetings with team members can provide the forum for a conversation about any health changes.
- Asking people how they are on a regular basis will help to create an open and inclusive culture where people can raise any concerns.
- Don't make assumptions, everyone is different; symptoms can fluctuate and be felt to varying degrees so take the lead from the individual
- Don't assume that because someone sits within the "average" age range, that any changes in behaviour are menopause related
- Don't say "Are you going through the menopause?"
- Don't assume that because someone sits outside the "average" age range that changes to behaviour are not menopause related.

Holding a sensitive discussion

It can be difficult to start a conversation about the impact of menopause and people may feel uncomfortable discussing it with you. You may not feel completely comfortable initiating this conversation.

It is important to set the right tone when opening a conversation about any sensitive issue. By asking open questions and providing a safe space for someone to talk freely, you will be able to understand what is happening for them and what support they may find useful. Like any sensitive conversation, it is helpful to focus on listening to understand.

A great opening question that allows for a range of possibilities is to simply ask people “How are you?” This provides the opportunity for a discussion that can be led by the person. Tips that help plan a conversation include the following.

- Avoid interruptions – switch off phones, ensure colleagues can’t walk in and interrupt.
- Ask simple, open, non-judgmental questions and avoid patronising or advice-giving responses
- Listen to what people have to say and be patient if they don’t wish to talk at this point. Knowing that a manager cares to ask the question, may provide the environment for a conversation at a later date.
- Even if you have experienced menopause yourself, don’t assume that the person will share the same experience.
- Listen actively and carefully
- Speak calmly
- Encourage people to talk and understand that they may need time to think about what to say. Be prepared for some silence.
- Give people ample opportunity to explain the situation in their own words
- Ask if there is anything in the workplace (e.g. heating or ventilation) that could be changed to support their comfort.

Confidentiality

If someone tells you about their health condition, including menopausal symptoms, this 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 don’t want shared with colleagues.

Practical help

The menopause affects people in different ways and there are practical steps you can take to support someone experiencing the menopause at work.

The following page has some ideas about providing practical help to affected staff.

Symptom	Practical steps
Sleep disruption and/or night sweats	<p>Recognise someone may need to take a short-term absence if they've had a difficult night.</p> <p>Offer a flexible working arrangement, for example either a later start time or an earlier finish time or allow staff to work from home on an ad hoc basis if they've had sleep disruptions.</p>
Hot flushes and/or daytime sweats	<p>Look at ways to cool the working environment, for example provide a fan, or move a desk close to a window, if possible, etc.</p> <p>Limit the time wearing PPE such as face masks if working in labs or with machinery, if practical.</p>
Heavy or irregular periods	<p>Acknowledge there will be more frequent breaks and allow staff to leave work at short notice, and temporarily work from home if they have very heavy bleeding.</p>
Headaches and fatigue	<p>Consider a temporary adjustment to work duties</p> <p>Provide a quiet area to work where possible</p> <p>Enable more frequent breaks where possible.</p>
Muscular aches, and bone and joint pain	<p>Encourage movement and stretches if that helps or to undertake an ergonomic workstation assessment.</p>
Psychological issues (for example loss of confidence, poor concentration, anxiety etc.)	<p>Support your staff member to discuss concerns with you</p> <p>Discuss possible adjustments to tasks and duties that are proving a challenge</p> <p>Refer to EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) or the Occupational Health team where appropriate</p> <p>Allow time out from others when needed, to have some quiet time or to undertake relaxation or mindfulness activities</p> <p>Have agreed protected time in their diary to catch up with work</p> <p>Encourage staff member to visit their GP for support</p> <p>Ensure your staff are not disadvantaged if they take leave for their wellbeing.</p>

APPENDIX 1 RESOURCES

Relevant University of Otago websites

[Employee Assistance Programme](#)

[The Healthy Campus website](#)

[Occupational Health](#)

[Equity and Diversity Policy](#)

Further Information and Resources

[Vodafone Menopause Toolkit](#)

CIPD have created a [Guide to Managing Menopause at Work – Guidance for Line Managers](#)

[My Menopause Transformation – an interview with Kate Billings](#)

Interesting talks

[Breaking the silence on menopause](#) – a Radio NZ podcast and article (Feb 2022)

[The Realities of menopause with Nicky Pellegrino](#) - a Radio NZ podcast and article (Jan 2022)

[How Menopause affects the brain](#) – TED talk by Lisa Mosconi (Neuroscientist, and Director of the Women's brain Initiative)

[The Hormone Rollercoaster](#) – a series of podcasts featuring Dr Bev Lawton (2015) , director of Victoria University of Wellington's Centre for Women's Health Research.

[An interview with Kate Billings](#) as part of the Women in Leadership series

Two documentaries with Davina McCall

[Sex, Myths and Menopause](#)

[Sex, Mind and Menopause](#)

Websites

[PowerPause](#)

Books by NZ authors

- Menopause: A guide for Every Woman by Beverley Lawton
- This Changes Everything: The Honest Guide to Menopause and Perimenopause by Niki Bezzant
- Don't sweat it by Nicky Pellegrino

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