With almost half of the UK nursing workforce aged 41 or over, it’s likely that many will be in the throes of menopause or perimenopause now or in the near future.

But a Nursing Standard survey of 2,241 UK nurses has laid bare just how poorly-supported some staff are when it comes to coping with menopause symptoms at work.

Only five in every 100 nurses in our survey said they work for an employer that has a workplace policy on the menopause.

Many respondents going through the menopause highlighted a lack of understanding and empathy in the way their debilitating symptoms were viewed.

‘I have mentioned at work that I struggle sometimes with symptoms but no one has directed me to information,’ one respondent said.

‘I am in the last stages of the menopause… it’s difficult,’ said another. ‘There is no help and support at work and in fact I find most people are quite flippant about it.’

One nurse said: ‘The menopause never gets mentioned even though quite a few of the team are affected.’

**What help am I entitled to?**

Employers, in the NHS or otherwise, are under no legal obligation to have a menopause policy for their staff.

**Women coping with menopause symptoms deserve support and empathy in the workplace.**

By Erin Dean
health journalist

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**ANALYSIS**

**Calling time on a culture of silence**

Women coping with menopause symptoms deserve support and empathy in the workplace.

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**Peer-reviewed article**

The role of chaplains in supporting patients and staff p45
However, they do have a legal duty to ensure that working conditions do not exacerbate someone’s symptoms, and they must protect employees from discrimination, the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (CIPD) points out.

The CIPD has called for the menopause to be seen as an occupational health issue. In guidance issued earlier this year, it says employers should provide menopause awareness training for line managers and offer adjustments to help women cope with symptoms at work. These could include late start times for women experiencing sleep disturbance, or regulating room temperature to help women who are experiencing hot flushes.

Lack of workplace policies

MPs have called for more action on the issue too, stating that every employer should have a menopause policy, just as they have maternity policies.

But more than half (55%) of respondents to the Nursing Standard survey said they were unaware whether there was a menopause policy where they work. A further 41% said such a policy did not exist in their workplace.

Are you menopause-aware? Look for these signs and symptoms

- Menopause refers to the time when a woman has not had a period for 12 months and is no longer able to get pregnant
- It usually happens between age 45 and 55. In the UK the average age is 51
- The time before the menopause, when oestrogen levels gradually begin to decline, is called the perimenopause
- Hot flushes are the most common symptom of the menopause, occurring in three in every four menopausal women
- Other common symptoms include night sweats, sleeplessness, vaginal dryness, irritated skin, more frequent urinary incontinence and urinary tract infections, low mood and a reduced interest in sex
- Symptoms vary hugely in duration, severity and effect

One told us: ‘Wish it did [have a policy]. I’ve been through the menopause and it’s hard when you have to work through it. I suffered bad hot flushes and depression.’

Menopause specialist nurse Kathy Abernethy, former chair of the British Menopause Society, says there is a dearth of advice and support for nursing staff.

‘I regularly have nurses and midwives knocking on my office door informally asking for menopause advice because they are struggling with symptoms at work,’ adds Ms Abernathy, director of menopause services at Peppy Health.

‘Menopause policies or guidelines are useful as they highlight the importance of the subject, but it should already be easy to support staff if the will is there.

‘The Health and Safety at Work Act covers work environment; the Gender Act and Equality Act support the need for consideration.

‘I work in a unit where it can be 28°C. We’re not allowed a fan because of infection control. Some team members who have not experienced menopause symptoms do not understand’

Nursing Standard survey participant

Source: Women’s Health Concern: The menopause factsheet tinyurl.com/menopause-factsheet
of menopause, without specifically naming it.
‘More important is the message that an employer gives that this is taken seriously, that it can be discussed openly and that the nurse can report difficulties and expect action and support.
‘Occupational health staff tell me the problem is that understanding is one thing but implementing flexible changes is much harder within the constraints of a stretched NHS service.’

Employers taking action
A significant number of nurses who responded to our survey said their employers were developing a menopause policy, suggesting that awareness is expanding.

Managers do not ensure any of the policy is followed... No air-conditioning or regular rest periods – another tick-box exercise’
Nursing Standard survey participant

‘Our well-being team is looking into it at the moment,’ said one.
Some highlighted initiatives including information workshops and meetings, although attending could be difficult due to staff shortages.
But a nurse working for an employer with a policy pointed out it is only effective if implemented.

We had menopause symptoms and knew we had to take action
Breaking the taboo of menopause to improve the experience for staff has led to significant changes at Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust in Nottinghamshire.
Trust chief nurse Suzanne Banks (pictured) and a number of women on her team were going through the menopause and discussing the significant impact it was having.
‘Some members of my team were raising concerns, saying they didn’t feel at the top of their game any more, were constantly tired and questioned their credibility and competence, which all made me think we need to do something about it,’ says Ms Banks.

Workforce demographics
She realised that with women making up 81% of the trust’s permanent workforce – and 47% of them over the age of 45 – it must be a significant problem for a large number of staff.
She drew together a group of people with expertise or interest in menopause, and contacted Henpicked, a charity for women aged over 40. The group developed guidelines, an information leaflet and a conference focused on all line managers, particularly those who were younger or male, and staff going through the menopause.
The trust has run two conferences, and is planning two more this year. The conferences are always opened by the medical director and the chief executive, both of whom are men.
‘This is really important to show staff that they are supported, it isn’t just a female thing,’ Ms Banks says.
A menopause support group has been also been set up, and university-led research into the efficacy of menopause support is currently following a cohort of women at the hospital.

Simple, practical ways to minimise symptoms
Desk fans are available for offices, and access to water stations and changing facilities is supported. And women struggling with menopausal symptoms can apply for flexible working.
‘If someone is particularly struggling with hot flushes or night-time sweats, they may need flexibility around the hours they are working because the last thing they want is to come in on an early shift, and we don’t want them to come in if they are really tired. They can go through the flexible working policy with their manager,’ Ms Banks says.
It is difficult to know whether the changes are having an effect on staff retention and absence, because the electronic staff record does not give menopause as a reason for sick leave, a fact that frustrates Ms Banks.
But she is confident about the trust’s new open approach to the issue: ‘Menopause is spoken about all the time and it is no longer a taboo subject here.’
Seven ways to make menopause more manageable in and outside work

» Look after your health: If you experience symptoms, see a health professional (such as your GP) for advice

» Get the help you need: Discuss your practical needs with your line manager, human resources manager or other manager you feel comfortable talking to. You could make an appointment with occupational health to discuss support and possible work adjustments

» Be open: Talk about your symptoms with colleagues. Share tips on how to cope and sources of support

» Avoid symptom triggers: Caffeine and spicy foods can trigger hot flushes, so avoid where possible while at work

» Use technology: Hormone changes can affect memory, so use your phone or email calendar to set reminders

» Take time out: Try relaxation techniques such as mindfulness, or consider cognitive behavioural therapy, which can help to combat menopause-related anxiety and low mood

» Lifestyle changes: Hormone changes as a result of the menopause can put women at risk of osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease, so consider lifestyle changes such as weight reduction, smoking cessation and doing weight-bearing exercises to help protect your bones

Memo to line managers – how to help your staff cope with menopause

» Regular informal conversations between you and your staff could enable discussion of changes in health, including issues relating to the menopause

» Review workplace temperature and ventilation. Consider having a fan in an office, or locating a workstation near an opening window or away from a heat source

» Focus on flexible working hours or shift changes. If sleep is disturbed, later start times might be helpful

» Provide access to cold drinking water in all work situations, including community settings

» Ensure access to toilets and washing facilities, including when travelling or working in temporary locations

» Where practicable, take a flexible approach to uniforms. This might include the use of thermally comfortable fabrics and optional layers

Source: Faculty of Occupational Medicine guidance on menopause and the workplace tinyurl.com/work-menopause

‘Managers do not ensure that any of the policy is followed,’ the nurse said. ‘No air-conditioning or regular rest periods for the menopausal woman, despite saying that they do in the policy. Another tick-box exercise.’

Ms Abernethy says changes that employers can implement to help staff include providing fans, placing computers near windows that open and offering shorter working hours.

Nursing Standard survey respondents said they particularly struggled with hot flushes at work in heavy and uncomfortable uniforms.

‘I work in a unit [that is] 26-28°C,’ one said. ‘Not allowed fan because [of] infection control. Challenge doing job. Not understood by some team members who [have] not experienced menopause symptoms.’

Uniform challenges

Several nurses said they were not allowed to wear a summer or lighter uniform, which would help those with hot flushes.

One said: ‘I suffer extreme hot flushes but am told I have to wear a plastic apron which ties up and covers my front and back, leaving me soaked in sweat when doing the drug round,’ a nurse said.

‘Also scrubs are only allowed above a certain temperature. I find the uniforms unbearable at times and ill-fitting,’ a nurse said.

Uniform challenges

Another added: ‘I know management have not allowed a summer uniform which would

be very beneficial to those of us who suffer from hot flushes.’

Others said the warmer working environment made her symptoms worse.

‘One of the most difficult issues is heat,’ the nurse said. ‘My ward is sometimes 29°C, which is a nightmare combined with hot flushes.’

One nurse described how difficult working life can be for nurses in perimenopause, when they may be having heavy and unpredictable bleeds.

She pointed out the difficulty of accessing toilets when working in the community.

‘It’s not just menopause, what about perimenopausal symptoms? Excessive heavy periods as a community nurse – where are the public toilets? Carrying used sanitary products in your car as you can use patients’ toilets but not leave the products there. If there’s no toilet, you mess your uniform but still have to carry on with visits.’

One thing that was clear from our survey was the power of peer support.

‘[My employer] was really supportive, [I] saw the GP and was on treatment within 48 hours,’ said one nurse.

‘There’s lots of women in their early 50s in my clinical area, including the boss, so we support each other,’ another said.

CIPD: Let’s Talk Menopause guidance tinyurl.com/menopause-CIPD

View other RCNi articles on menopause rcni.com/keywords/menopause

‘I regularly have nurses and midwives knocking on my door informally asking for menopause advice because they are struggling with symptoms at work’

Kathy Abernethy, menopause specialist nurse