Valuing women

TEACHERS working through the menopause

Guidance for members in England and Wales
In a female-dominated profession such as teaching, supporting women who are teaching whilst at the same time experiencing symptoms of the menopause should feature high on any school leader’s agenda.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Although all women will experience the menopause at some stage in their life, teachers can experience a more difficult time than women who work in other occupations and professions because of the nature of their role.

It is, therefore, important to recognise that the menopause is an occupational health issue for women teachers, as well as also being an equality issue.

The purpose of this guidance is to suggest practical ways in which the school environment can be improved for women who are going through the menopause.

**WHAT WE SAY**

When you read through this document you may have questions about what happens in your particular school or workplace and there are likely to be collective issues that affect other members. In most circumstances, you should discuss the matter with your workplace representative initially as s/he will know whether similar concerns have been raised by other members. If you do not have a representative at the moment, it would be a good idea to get members together to elect one. Further advice on this is available at: [www.teachers.org.uk/node/10513](http://www.teachers.org.uk/node/10513).

Although members may sometimes feel that they are the only person who is affected by or concerned about a particular issue, in reality this is seldom the case. The difficulties you may experience are likely to be linked to wider conditions at the school and, as a member of the NUT, you have the advantage of being able to act collectively with your colleagues. This will give you the confidence of knowing that you have the weight of the Union behind you.

The guidance is based on the findings of the NUT’s 2014 Menopause Survey, which questioned women NUT members between the ages of 45 and 60 about their experiences of the menopause, including how they were treated, what practical difficulties exist and how these could be overcome.
KEY FINDINGS

• Almost half of respondents did not feel that experienced women teachers were valued at their school.

• More than 80 per cent said that, if teachers over the age of 50 were valued for their contribution to their school, this would help deal with the challenges posed by the menopause for teachers.

• Most respondents had not disclosed their menopausal status to their line manager.

• Only a small number of respondents had ever requested any adjustments to their working arrangements to help them cope (just over 10 per cent). Most requests cost very little or nothing at all (for example being allowed to open a window, asking for a small fan, fitting a valve on radiators to control heating). Yet more than half had their requests turned down.

• Only 20 per cent of respondents had taken sick leave because of menopausal symptoms but over 80 per cent of these had not disclosed the menopause as the reason.

• A minority (12.6 per cent) believed that they or a colleague had been subjected to detrimental treatment for reasons related to the menopause. The main form of this was being subject to, or threatened with, capability proceedings.

Set out below is a series of commonly asked questions, with responses based on the experiences of fellow NUT women members who took part in our 2014 survey.
Should I disclose my menopause status to my line manager if my working conditions are exacerbating the symptoms?

According to our survey, nearly 80 per cent of respondents did not disclose that they were experiencing the menopause. This is understandable. Some members said such a discussion would have been embarrassing. Other concerns were linked to worries about confidentiality, or the fact that the line manager was either younger, or a man, or both.

One way of avoiding the need for specific disclosure is to seek to collectivise the issue so that it is not just about what one woman teacher is experiencing. Discussing the issues with other women colleagues, including those who have gone through the menopause and those who have not yet started, can help to make the menopause a mainstream issue. Many of the practical workplace changes that can make life more bearable for menopausal teachers will also benefit other teachers, both male and female (see section below). A decent workplace for all is essential as it avoids stigmatising individuals.

If there is a school health and safety committee, why not seek to include the menopause as an item on the agenda, with a view to inclusion of the menopause in the school health and safety policy? If you raise the issue with your NUT division secretary or health and safety adviser, the menopause could be included as an agenda item at local authority or academy chain health and safety committees.

Where menopause symptoms are particularly severe, to the extent that the condition would be classed as a disability, there may be a need to disclose the effects to a line manager so that reasonable adjustments can be negotiated (see section below – Can the Menopause be classed as a Disability? and paragraph 5.1.6 of the NUT’s ‘Making Work Fit’ – www.teachers.org.uk/node/21665)
I am experiencing regular hot flushes during lessons. What can I reasonably ask my school to do to help me cope with these symptoms?

Are you able to easily open a window, or windows? If not, request that this be addressed. Ventilation is important for everyone, including children. Leaving a door open may also help.

Are you able to turn down or turn off the radiator(s) in your classroom? If not, request that this be also addressed. It will also save energy. As long as the temperature does not drop below 18C, it should be comfortable for all occupants.

Sometimes interpersonal difficulties can arise between colleagues, for example, in relation to what constitutes a reasonable working temperature. In some cases, this may be due to lack of awareness. If the situation is explained to colleagues, they will have a better understanding.

Window blinds can also help in classrooms which do not benefit from shade.

It is also helpful to keep chilled water in the nearest fridge and have it to hand during lessons.

You may also find it is helpful to wear layered clothing or cardigans/jackets with zips or buttons which can be undone, rather than jumpers which need to be taken off completely when hot.

I am experiencing heavy periods and bladder problems which mean that I need ready access to toilet and washing facilities. This is difficult for me as I cannot simply walk out of my class. What do you suggest?

In our 2014 Menopause Survey, over half of all respondents reported that being close to toilet facilities was helpful. Nearly half said that provision of short periods of cover for teachers who need to leave the classroom briefly would be beneficial.

Requesting a classroom in close proximity to a toilet may, or may not, be feasible. If short periods of informal cover can be arranged between colleagues, that may be the best option. If not, and the need is acute, a formal arrangement may need to be agreed with management. A supporting note from your GP may be helpful in this respect, although this raises the issue of disclosure, as discussed above.
If I take sick leave that is menopause-related, should I declare that this is the reason why I am off sick?

According to our 2014 Menopause Survey, very few respondents had, in fact, ever taken sick leave linked to the menopause (just over 20 per cent). Of these, only 18 per cent had informed their school that the menopause was the reason for the sick leave, suggesting that there are major concerns about the way in which management may respond.

There is no requirement to be so specific either on GP Fit Note certificates or when self-certificating. The symptoms of the menopause which may affect the ability to work: insomnia; incontinence; bladder infections; fatigue due to night sweats are not exclusively menopause-related. You may, therefore, prefer not to include unnecessary detail.

I am finding it hard to work full-time due to the severity of my menopause symptoms, which leave me exhausted. What rights do I have in these circumstances?

Very few respondents to our survey had requested adjustments to working arrangements (only 10 per cent) but of these, half had been successful. So, if you feel that some form of temporary or permanent part-time work would assist, it is worth putting in a request. Where the nature, length and severity of your symptoms means that you could be classified as disabled, this will strengthen your case (see question below).
Can the menopause be classed as a disability?

Yes, it can. You are likely to be covered by the legal definition of disability if your symptoms have a more than minor impact on your ability to teach.

Disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

For the purposes of the Equality Act:

“substantial” – means neither minor nor trivial

“long-term” – means that the effect of the impairment has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least 12 months; or is likely to last for the rest of the life of the person affected; or has not lasted 12 months, but is likely to recur.

“normal day-to-day activities” – include everyday things like eating, washing, walking and going shopping

What should I do if symptoms attributable to the menopause start to affect my performance at work?

In the vast majority of cases, the menopause is unlikely to have a negative impact on work performance if reasonable adjustments are made when needed. However, in the light of responses to the NUT menopause survey, it is clear that it will be for you to be proactive in seeking support by identifying barriers to your continued success (i.e. the lack of adequate ventilation, or access to cold drinking water etc.). You should not wait to be threatened with capability procedures before doing so. If you believe your concerns are not being taken seriously, you should set them out in writing to your headteacher/principal so that if the matter is later disputed, there is clear evidence that you notified your employer of your condition and of the barriers at your workplace which made it difficult for you to cope.
What should I do if I believe that the reason for me being placed on capability is because of the temporary problems I am experiencing as a result of the menopause?

Contact the NUT Adviseline at once (telephone 020 3006 6266); Email: nutadvice@nut.org.uk.

Management at my school is ‘macho’ and male-dominated, meaning that there is no climate of openness about the menopause and women teachers are afraid of admitting to anything that could be seen as a sign of weakness by management. What can we do about this?

This is all about changing the culture of the workplace. Nearly 60 per cent of respondents to our 2014 Menopause Survey said that an understanding attitude from management would help deal with the challenges thrown up by the menopause.

Whilst the NUT can of course support individual teachers through casework, changing the culture of a workplace requires a collective response and engagement from all staff – preferably men, as well as women.

This could involve:

- raising concerns at Union meetings;
- putting items on the agenda for staff meetings and health and safety committee meetings;
- asking staff governors to raise the profile of the menopause at governor meetings;
- appointing a ‘champion’ (preferably someone in senior management) to promote awareness of various conditions within the school/college, including the menopause.
Further Resources

More detailed advice on related issues can be found in the following NUT guidance documents:

- NUT guidance on sick leave/pay:
  www.teachers.org.uk/node/1584

- NUT model disability leave procedure:
  www.teachers.org.uk/node/12931

- NUT guidance on women’s health and safety:
  www.teachers.org.uk/node/12572

- NUT guidance ‘Making Work Fit’:
  www.teachers.org.uk/node/21665

- TUC Guidance on Supporting Women through the Menopause:
  www.tuc.org.uk

- The Menopause Exchange Newsletters:
  www.menopause-exchange.co.uk

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Working through the menopause

All women should be able to:

- Work through the menopause in an environment which is supportive;
- Control room temperature in their classrooms (and through negotiation the staffroom as well);
- Access a toilet during breaktimes – and expect systems to be in place in the workplace which ensure that if a member of staff wishes to use the toilet during lesson time they are able to do so;
- Expect understanding from managers and work colleagues regarding any condition which may require reasonable adjustments; and
- Work in an environment where reasonable adjustments are made for all, to ensure a comfortable working environment which benefits staff, pupils and parents.

Some suggested issues to raise in your workplace:

- Is there an awareness of the issue by all staff so that women do not need to raise it as an individual issue?
- Is there a climate of openness where women are able, if they so choose, to disclose their symptoms to colleagues and management and request adjustments?
- Is there adequate ventilation and temperature control in each classroom and in other areas of the school, such as the staffroom?
- Is there a procedure for providing brief cover arrangements for women who may need to use toilet/washing facilities during a lesson?
- Is there ready access to cold drinking water?

www.teachers.org.uk/genderequality/policy