

Supporting staff affected by menopause

Menopause can be defined as the natural stage in life when periods stop and ovaries lose their reproductive function. The medical definition of menopause is when you have not had your monthly period for at least 12 consecutive months. This usually happens between the ages of 45 and 55 but it can be earlier or later.

Menopause and perimenopause (the phase leading up to the menopause) can cause symptoms including anxiety, mood swings, brain fog, hot flushes and irregular periods. These symptoms can start years before your periods stop and carry on afterwards. Menopause and perimenopause symptoms can have a big impact on your life, including relationships and work.

The NHS workforce employs over 1.3 million people with 76.5% of them (over 1 million) women, of which women between the ages of 45 and 54 make up 19.1% (over 260,000) of the entire NHS workforce.

Good menopause care has both direct and indirect impacts on workforce retention levels, productivity, and absenteeism. Ensuring staff get the support they need is an important part of retaining experienced talent and skills. It would also minimise the impact of a person's symptoms, health/wellbeing issues, and productivity on patient outcomes, their work, personal life, and relationships.

Across South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw ICS, a need was identified to raise awareness and understanding of the menopause, and how the symptoms can affect our NHS colleagues. A communication and engagement campaign was established, which began with a series of educational webinars delivered by menopause professionals at a partner organisation. These webinars, which were open to NHS colleagues as well as their partners and families, aimed to help de-myth the menopause, and offer an opportunity to talk openly about the symptoms and available support options.

As well as delivery of the above webinars, the partner organisation were commissioned to train 45 Menopause Advocates across the ICS. This advocacy programme hopes to identify staff members with an interest in menopause, who can be available to support colleagues, signpost to resources and raise awareness across the system.

"I undertook the "Menopause in the Workplace for partners, family, and friends" which was insightful, comforting, and gave a heads up to our male counterparts of what women going through menopause may be facing i.e., brain fog, temporary illness, headaches etc and how to support this at work and at home as a partner, friend, and a family member."

For more information on the work South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw ICS have delivered, you can view their menopause support website: <https://sybics.co.uk/workforce-wellbeing/menopause-support-and-resources-health-and-staff>

An analysis of workforce data across Dorset ICS showed that a large proportion of their female workforce fall in the 45-55 age group. Working in collaboration with their local Women's Networks, a staff engagement exercise identified a need for menopause awareness training – particularly to support line managers in holding wellbeing conversations in which menopause can be discussed and colleagues can be safely signposted to support.

As well as encouraging line managers to attend the national “having safe and effective wellbeing conversations” training programme, a local support programme has been established to offer line managers the opportunity to attend talks that raise awareness of the menopause and enable open conversations and ideas sharing in how to approach talking about the menopause with compassion.

“Being able to feel connected to others who are having menopause symptoms and knowing you are not alone. I really liked how we could talk in groups sharing experiences and ideas and the importance sharing and supporting each other, plus advice and access to resources.”

The ICS are also now looking to establish peer support networks for both male and female colleagues to be able to raise awareness of signs and symptoms and have recently recruited a Menopause Support Nurse who is dedicated to supporting staff across the system.

For more information on the work Dorset ICS have delivered, you can view their website: <https://joinourdorset.nhs.uk/wellbeing/?s=menopause>

As part of their commitment to deliver locally owned health and wellbeing initiatives that support the needs of their workforce, the Care Plus Group (a Community Interest Company in the Humber Coast and Vale ICS) commissioned a partner organisation to offer awareness sessions on the issues surrounding menopause.

The “Let's Talk About Menopause” briefings were available to all colleagues across the ICS and aimed to promote understanding of the menopause and how the symptoms can present. Further sessions were later offered specifically to line managers, focussing on how to recognise the symptoms of menopause, and understand how they can impact colleagues at work. The bespoke line manager sessions also shared advice on how to talk through reasonable workplace adjustments with colleagues, and skills and techniques to confidently have supportive conversations with colleagues around menopause.

Feedback from line managers who attended the session includes colleagues sharing that they were not fully aware of the detrimental impact the menopause could have and they are now feeling encouraged to learn more about the signs and symptoms and to discuss the subject in a safe space.