

Supporting workers in the food and drink industry through the menopause



Whilst there has been an increase in efforts over recent years to promote gender equality and to tackle mental health issues in the workplace, there is still a taboo over the subject of the menopause. This is particularly so in some areas of the F&D industry which have traditionally been male dominated, like restaurant kitchens for example. But better support for employees affected by menopause is not only crucial to employee well-being, it can also have wider benefits to your organisation.

The menopause typically affects those aged between 45 and 55. Recent studies show that the 50-60 age bracket is the fastest growing employee age group, with a particular increase in women retiring later due to changes in the state pension. This means more people than ever will experience menopause during their working lives.

The impact of menopause can be severe, with symptoms sometimes negatively affecting an individual's performance and attendance at work. Psychological effects are often underestimated and can be hard to quantify, however, there is no doubt that a loss of confidence, mood disturbances, anxiety or depression (to name a few) can destroy workplace relationships and can even force employees to leave work.

Unfortunately, many people suffer in silence and do not disclose their symptoms to colleagues or reporting lines. The reasons for this vary. Beyond the embarrassment factor, sufferers may not even know that their symptoms result from menopause. Since its effects and severity are so wide-ranging, it can be difficult for those suffering to confide even in colleagues who have also experienced menopause. Then there is the challenge of speaking about it to male or young female line managers.



Menopause is not in itself a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. However, employment tribunal case law demonstrates how an employer's treatment of staff undergoing the menopause can potentially give rise to discrimination at work. Employers must treat symptoms of menopause equally to other medical conditions as well as considering how menopause may lead to a disability which in turn can impact on an employee's performance and conduct.

It is therefore important for all food and drink businesses to be proactive and have appropriate support frameworks in place to not only assist employees' well-being but reduce business risks.

Companies need to create an open, inclusive and supporting culture to tackle the stigma; start with the following;

- engage with employees; do they feel like they have enough information and support?
- review and if necessary update existing policies and support structures. Existing policies may cover health in the workplace but they do specify menopause and how employees can speak up about issues? Consider having a bespoke menopause policy.
- Does your organisation have a well-being team?
- Could you incorporate the issues of menopause into wider workplace training? Are managers up to speed on how to handle such sensitive issues?
- Have you considered reasonable adjustments that may assist – for example flexible working arrangements, adapting uniforms or providing fans?

There are many small things that will assist but the key is to break the silence and begin to foster an open culture. This way employees will feel supported bringing increased loyalty to the business. Staff turnover may drop, sickness absences can be properly managed, performance will improve and risks will be reduced.

If you would like further advice on this area please contact our [employment team](#).