

Menopause in the workplace

Employee guide



The basics

This brief guide is aimed at employees who'd like basic information about the menopause. Although it's primarily for those who will experience the menopause, it could also be helpful for anyone who'd like to know more about the physiological and psychological changes it brings.

This can include partners, friends or colleagues of those experiencing menopause as an aid to understanding and support - not only personal relationships but also friendships and for work colleagues so changes and allowances can be made.

A natural transition

Menopause is a natural transition caused by changes in the balance of sex hormones as people age. Ovaries stop producing the hormone oestrogen and no longer release an egg each month. In short it eventually means the end of periods, although it's not something that happens overnight.

The hormone balance changes over several years – known as the 'perimenopause' phase – in which some experience certain symptoms. These can be physical, such as hot flushes, sleep problems, aches and pains, fatigue, or irregular periods. There can also be psychological symptoms, such as memory loss, mood swings, loss of confidence, anxiety and worry.



You're not alone

In the workplace, some employees who are experiencing the menopause find their job performance can suffer. It can mean they can't focus as they used to, and sleeplessness can lead to lack of concentration. It's manageable, but tough. Don't worry, you're not alone. There was once a conspiracy of silence around the menopause, but like sexism and mental health, the menopause is now a topic for discussion for everyone.

The facts

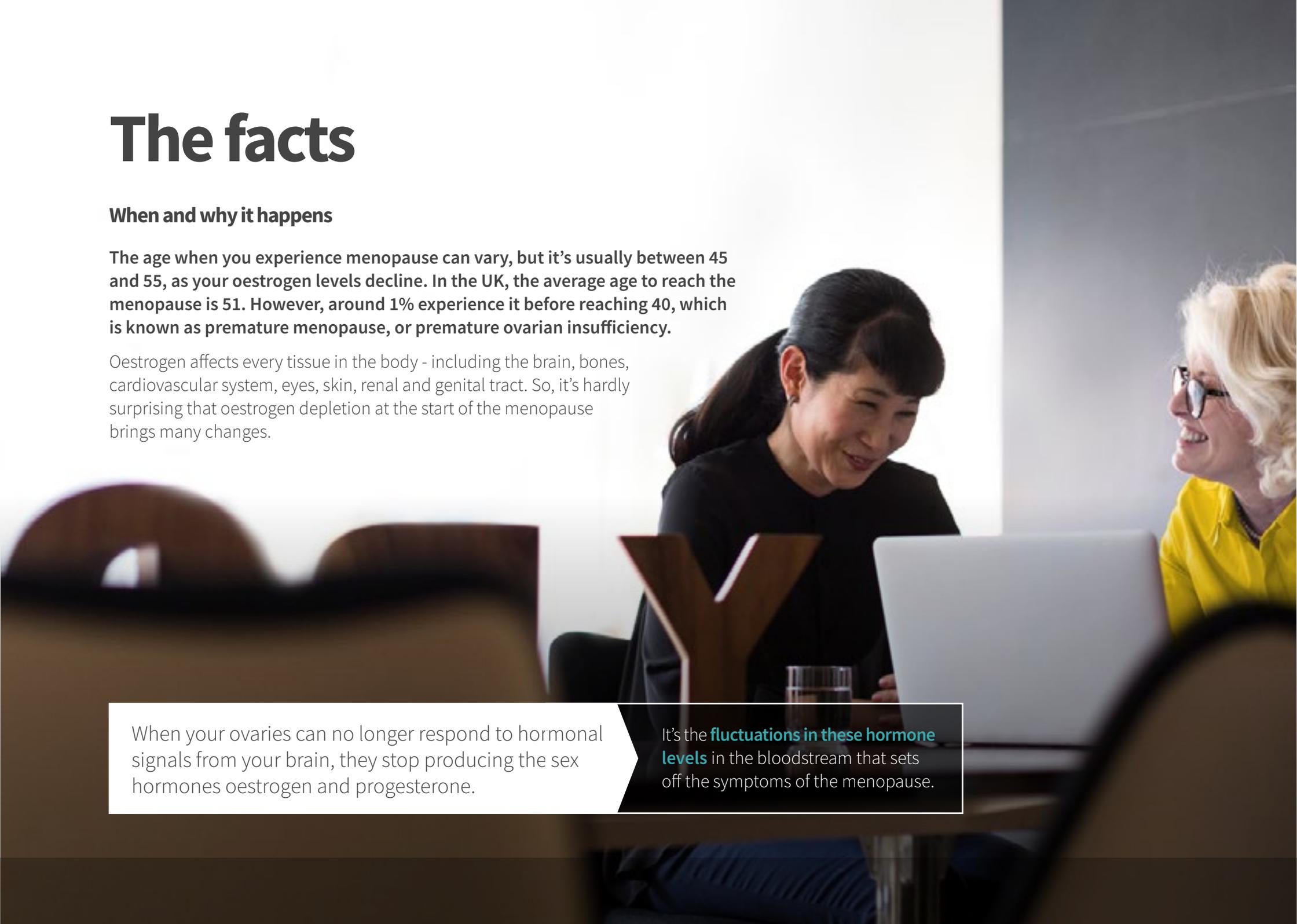
When and why it happens

The age when you experience menopause can vary, but it's usually between 45 and 55, as your oestrogen levels decline. In the UK, the average age to reach the menopause is 51. However, around 1% experience it before reaching 40, which is known as premature menopause, or premature ovarian insufficiency.

Oestrogen affects every tissue in the body - including the brain, bones, cardiovascular system, eyes, skin, renal and genital tract. So, it's hardly surprising that oestrogen depletion at the start of the menopause brings many changes.

When your ovaries can no longer respond to hormonal signals from your brain, they stop producing the sex hormones oestrogen and progesterone.

It's the **fluctuations in these hormone levels** in the bloodstream that sets off the symptoms of the menopause.



The facts continued

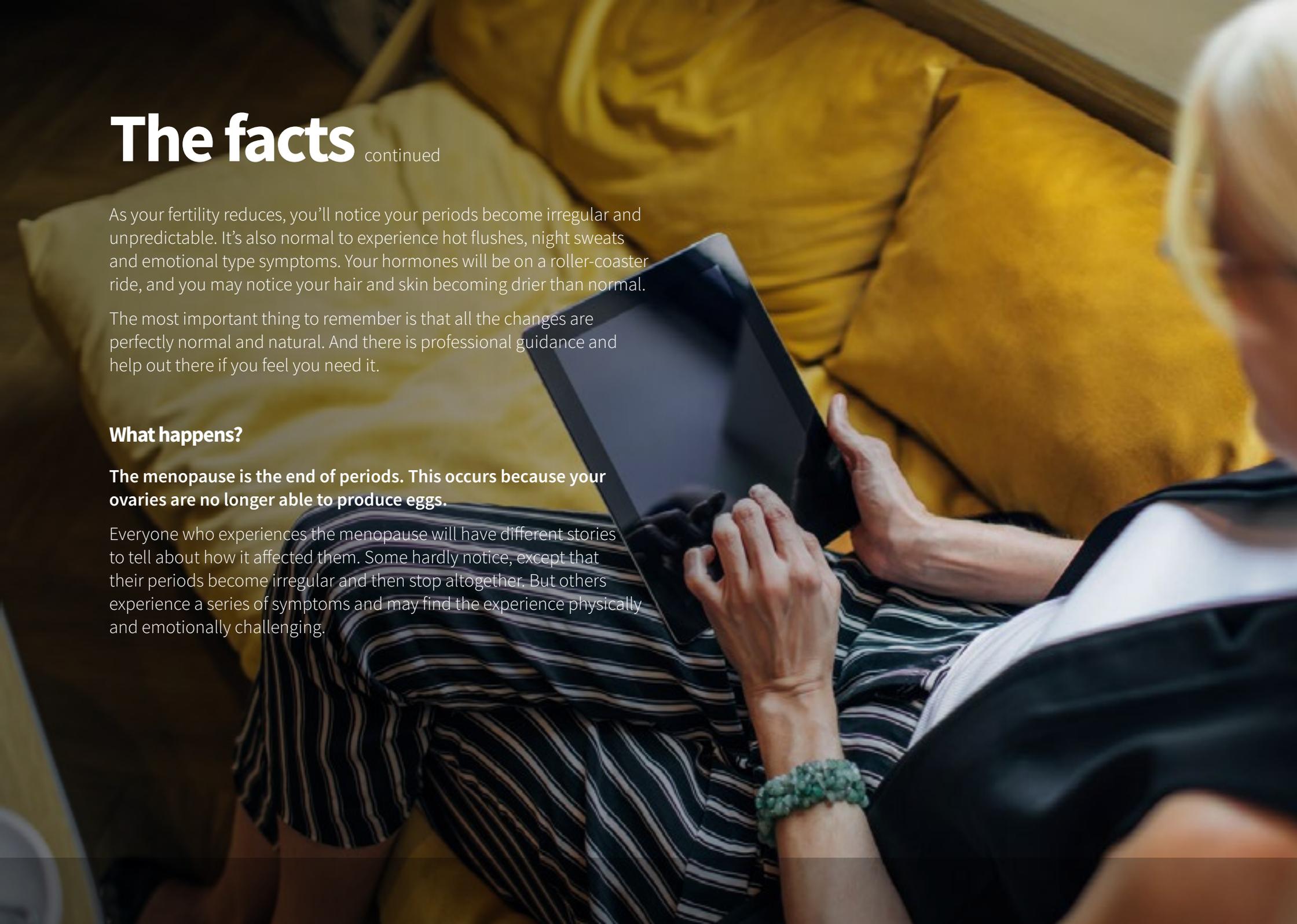
As your fertility reduces, you'll notice your periods become irregular and unpredictable. It's also normal to experience hot flushes, night sweats and emotional type symptoms. Your hormones will be on a roller-coaster ride, and you may notice your hair and skin becoming drier than normal.

The most important thing to remember is that all the changes are perfectly normal and natural. And there is professional guidance and help out there if you feel you need it.

What happens?

The menopause is the end of periods. This occurs because your ovaries are no longer able to produce eggs.

Everyone who experiences the menopause will have different stories to tell about how it affected them. Some hardly notice, except that their periods become irregular and then stop altogether. But others experience a series of symptoms and may find the experience physically and emotionally challenging.

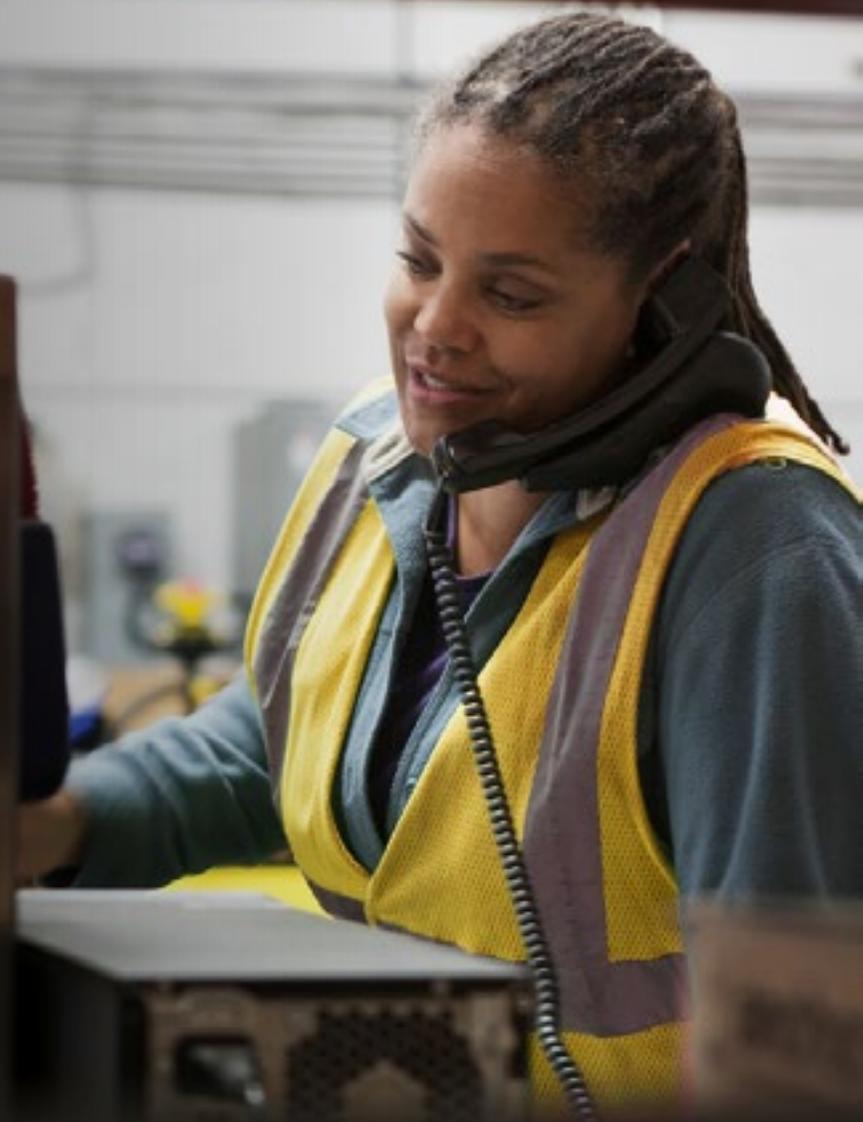


The issues

This section outlines some of the negative aspects of the menopause. Your GP can advise you on what's happening to your body and mind at this time of your life.

Some common menopause conditions

- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Insomnia
- Headaches
- Mood changes
- Palpitations
- Memory issues
- Joint stiffness
- Reduced muscle mass
- Urinary tract infections
- Reduced sex drive
- Vaginal dryness



The issues continued

Hot flushes and night sweats

Hot flushes affect about three quarters of those who experience the menopause. These usually start on the face and in the centre of the chest and then radiate over the body. Hot flushes appear to be due to a disorder of temperature control. As the result of this, body temperature falls, and you can start shivering and feeling cold in an attempt to restore your body's core temperature.

If you experience hot flushes and night sweats, simple measures can help, such as:

Wearing
light
clothing

Keeping **your**
bedroom
cool at night

Taking
a **cool**
shower

Using a
fan

Having
a **cold**
drink

If the flushes and sweats are frequent or severe, your GP may suggest hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

The issues continued

Additional menopause symptoms

The menopause can also increase the risk of developing osteoporosis, which thins the bones. Other physical symptoms can include thinning and wrinkling of the skin, due to a breakdown in the skin's collagen.

Urinary incontinence may also occur due to bladder control being affected by the lack of oestrogen. With more prolonged oestrogen deficiency, blood flow to the vagina is reduced which can result in painful intercourse.

On average, **most symptoms last around 4 years** from your last period. However, around **1 in every 10 women** experience them for **up to 12 years**.¹

¹ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/symptoms/>



The issues continued

Psychological issues

Some people experience mood swings and anxiety around the time of the menopause.

It can be difficult to determine the precise triggers, but menopause can often coincide with other major changes, such as:

- ✓ Children leaving (or returning) home
- ✓ The onset of other illnesses

Professional help and medical treatment is available if you find you are not coping with this time in your life. The menopause can be distressing not only for you, but for those you live with and spend time with.

It is important to recognise the symptoms and seek help, whether that is clinical help from the NHS or more informal support. You need to feel comfortable speaking about your concerns, whether that is to friends, partners, colleagues or your line manager or HR at work, about possible changes and to understand for altered behaviours in some instances.

Adjusting to the demands of middle age can take its toll on relationships.

If you find yourself thinking that your best years have already gone, it's probably time to take stock and adjust to a more positive frame of mind. But often, that's easier said than done.

Potential solutions

This section gives an overview of some of the many ways to combat the physical and psychological issues that the menopause brings. Your GP can advise on what's best for you.

Fight osteoporosis

Lower levels of oestrogen from the menopause can create weaker bones, known as osteoporosis. You can reduce your chances of developing osteoporosis by taking HRT.

Try hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

This is where you take oestrogen to replace the fall in your body's own levels. HRT is effective and is offered to those with menopausal symptoms, after weighing-up the risks and benefits.

HRT is available as tablets, skin patches, spray, and a gel to rub into the skin. It works well at relieving menopausal symptoms, specifically hot flushes and night sweats, but there are a number of side effects to consider. Your GP can give you more information to help you decide if it's for you.

The NHS recommends that you:

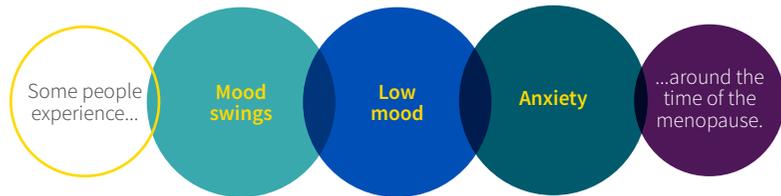
- ✓ Exercise regularly – including weight-bearing and resistance exercises
- ✓ Eat a healthy diet that includes plenty of fruit, vegetables and sources of calcium
- ✓ Get in the sun – sunlight on your skin triggers the production of vitamin D, which can help keep your bones strong
- ✓ Stop smoking and cut down on alcohol
- ✓ Take calcium and/or vitamin D supplements if you don't feel you're getting enough of these

Potential solutions continued

Try cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT is a type of talking therapy that can improve low mood and feelings of anxiety. Your GP may be able to refer you for CBT on the NHS or recommend self-help options such as online CBT courses.

Tackle anxiety



Self-help measures such as getting plenty of rest, taking regular exercise and doing relaxing activities such as yoga can help.

Improve your sex drive

It's common for people to lose interest in sex around the time of the menopause, but HRT can often help with this. If HRT isn't effective, you might be offered a testosterone supplement.

Testosterone is a sex hormone, that can help to restore sex drive during the menopause. **It can sometimes be prescribed by a GP** if they think it might help.

Combat vaginal dryness and discomfort

If your vagina becomes dry, painful or itchy as a result of the menopause, your GP can prescribe oestrogen treatment you put directly into your vagina as a pessary, cream or a vaginal ring. This can safely be used alongside HRT or without it.

Stay positive with these helpful links

It's easy to say, but a positive attitude to life can help make the menopause less difficult both for you and those around you.

Don't try and fight the changes that are happening to you and your body; let them become part of you and be proud of them.

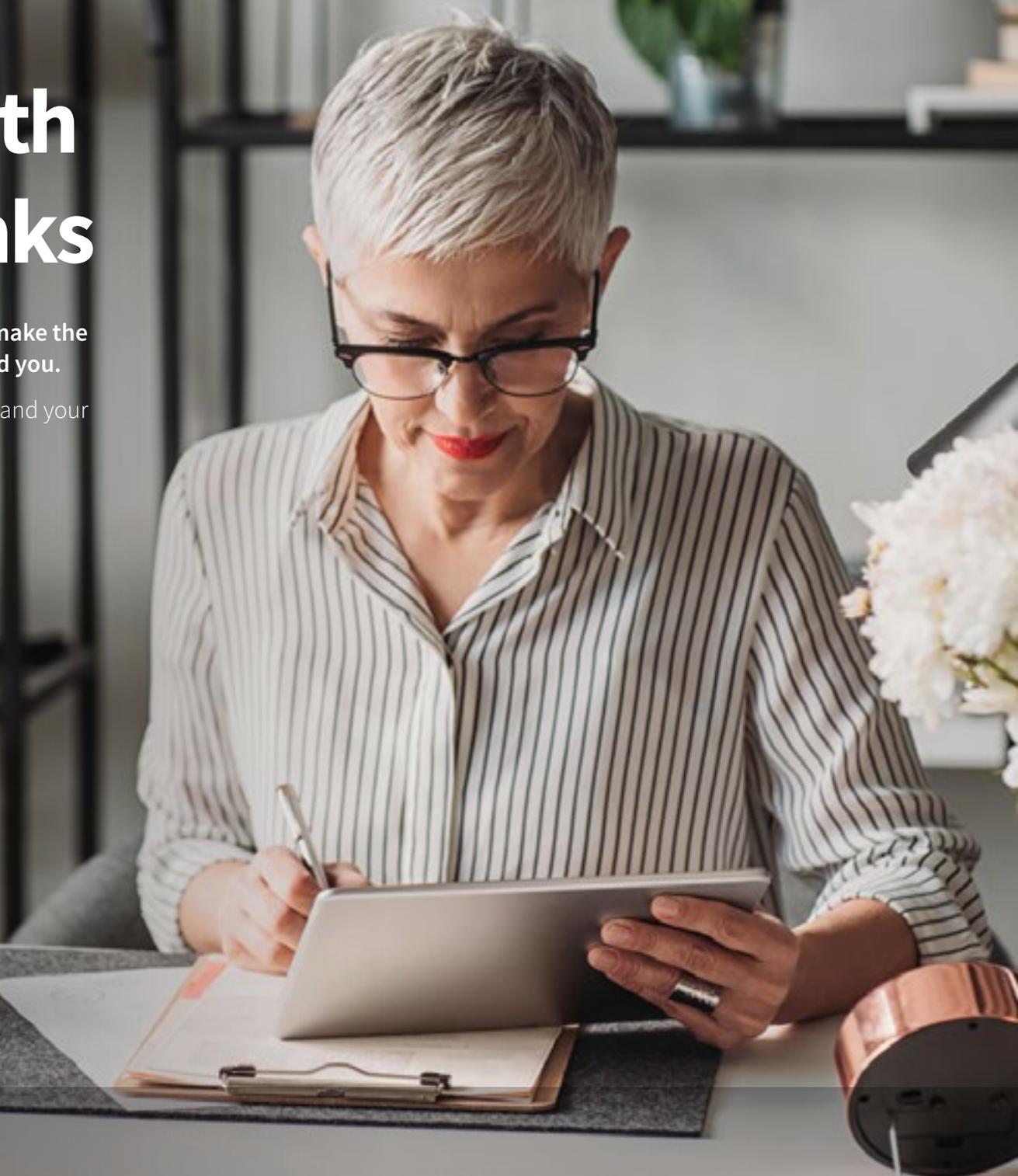
Here are **some useful links** for further information on the subject

Menopause in the workplace from specialist organisation 'HENPICKED'

www.menopauseintheworkplace.co.uk/

Menopause: medical information from the NHS

www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/



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