

# Managing menopause in the workplace

## MARGARET KIRBY

**A recent study on the impact of menopausal symptoms on female employees in the workplace raises the question of who is responsible to provide support in the workplace, and what is being done? Margaret Kirby, correspondent with Health and Safety Review (HSR)\* spoke with a number of occupational health, safety, and HR professionals on this once-taboo topic.**

The most recent data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) shows that there are over 1,225,000 women in the workforce in Ireland, with 418,989 of these in the menopausal age bracket of 45 – 64 years. These are employed across various industries from healthcare, manufacturing, public administration, hospitality, retail and others.

According to a new Irish study, symptoms including fatigue, sleeping difficulties and poor concentration are affecting many employees' work performance, and manager awareness and flexible work options are needed to reduce the physical and psychological health impact in the workplace.

### *Women wanted better manager awareness around what menopause was*

Late last year, the Government recognised the need to support and enhance menopausal care, and launched a website with information on menopause symptoms and treatment options. In addition to this, six specialist menopause clinics designed to treat complex symptoms of menopause were established.

In March this year a 'National Menopause Summit' was held in the Mansion House, Dublin, and was a sell-out success. Another summit is planned in Cork on October 20th, and 'World Menopause Day' is on October 18th, to raise awareness of support options available to improve health and wellbeing.

As awareness grows on this health issue, the legal responsibility to provide a work environment which enhances performance and wellbeing remains the responsibility of the employer, and similar to mental health risks, most employers recognise there is an onus on them to provide some level of support.

This sentiment is reinforced by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), which said: "There are benefits to employers and employees in promoting the health and welfare for menopausal women and the Authority will be considering initiatives in coming work programmes in order to assist workplaces in creating better environments for those experiencing menopausal symptoms."

## **WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY**

In terms of what can improve the work environment, studies indicate that more training and awareness is required for workplace managers, that workplace policies are required, that a level of flexibility in terms of working hours and patterns is essential – and to a lesser extent workplace temperature control, ventilation and easy access to toilet facilities are suggested as being helpful.

Specialist registrar in occupational medicine at Tallaght University Hospital and Medwise, Dr Mary Teresa O'Neill, co-authored the research paper on 'The Impact of Menopausal Symptoms on Work and Careers'. Ms O'Neill said that "during the study we found that the most common symptoms which impacted women at work were fatigue, brain fog, and reduced concentration, and to a lesser extent night sweats and hot flushes."

"When we asked the women participants, what would help most with their symptoms whilst at work, they were very clear on what was most important to them. They wanted better manager awareness around what menopause was, and more flexibility with their work", she explained.

Elaborating on what work flexibility means, she said this could mean a later start for work for a period of time, less night shifts or reduced hours, until the symptoms subside. She also recommended that workplaces put in place a policy or guidelines on the menopause, and spoke about the value of 'Menopause Champions'. "A champion is someone who can provide advice to employees. It can be someone in Occupational Health or anyone who has an interest in promoting wellbeing in a company", she explained.

## **IRISH WORKPLACES**

Martin Creagh, environment, health and safety (EHS) manager for the National Maternity Hospital (NMH), where 80% of the employees are female, agreed that a flexible approach to support staff who were experiencing symptoms was important, to retain valuable skillsets and employees. "We are fortunate to have an occupational health department within the hospital where employees can be referred to for further information and advice, and a very progressive management approach to flexible working", he said.

In many companies, there is a role for both occupational health – and health and safety – in managing this workplace issue. Risk assessments should consider the specific needs of menopausal workers, and ensure that their working environment does not exacerbate their symptoms.

Sandi O'Brien, occupational health nurse with Ipsen Ireland, makes the point that if an employee is involved in manual handling tasks, this may need to be re-assessed, as some lifting and carrying activities can aggravate pain, or prompt unexpected bleeds.

Margaret Morrissey, Irish representative of the Federation of Occupational Health Nurses European Union (FOHNEU), and secretary of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) Occupational Health section, explains that sometimes it may be necessary to place

employees on restricted duties, depending on what their roles are. She also says that the subject of the menopause has been very topical in Irish companies for the last two years.

“Women who work in companies which have a generous sick leave policy which can be availed of if necessary are very fortunate. Research shows they suffer less adverse effects, and tend to remain in the workplace longer”, she said.

Ms Morrissey said that many companies are also investing in raising awareness on this topic, and nationally there has been an increased demand for ‘Menopause Warriors’ who can speak openly on the topic, such as Dr Mary Ryan, consultant physician and endocrinologist, Dr Claire Cosgrave and Catherine O’ Keeffe.

She said that symptoms can vary from individual to individual, and everyone who presents to an Occupational Health department is assessed on a case-by-case basis. “Symptoms can be particular to certain days and times, and sometimes a person may not even realise what is causing them”.

She emphasised that everyone’s case is treated in confidence by Occupational Health teams, and if Occupational Health need to recommend work alterations for the person’s role, they liaise with the person’s supervisor/manager.

“Some people prefer not to have their manager know what their condition is, and we have to respect that”, Ms Morrissey said. Some companies also provide education and awareness sessions to staff through their healthcare provider, which can be very helpful.

## **MANAGER TRAINING**

Education and training for managers has also been identified in the ‘Menopause in the Workplace survey’, which has recently been relaunched for the third year running, by the Menopause Hub in Ireland.

The survey showed that 94% of women said more menopause awareness training was needed for managers and HR bosses. This finding is echoed by the British Menopause Society, who state that there is a need to provide information and to raise awareness, not just in women going through – or about to go through – the menopause, but for all staff.

This is particularly relevant for line managers who have responsibilities for the health and wellbeing of their team at work. Training and awareness can help managers to know how to respond, and to understand that symptoms are specific to the individual, intermittent, and that some flexibility around timelines and working hours over a limited period could significantly support the employee.

Sandi O’Brien agrees that education and training is important. This is particularly relevant when it comes to employees feeling comfortable discussing their symptoms with their manager.

It can often depend on the relationship between the manager and the employee. Ipsen Ireland has already taken a number of measures to support employees, and has an active menopause policy, which has benefited a number of employees who have sought and received “reasonable accommodations” due to their symptoms, explains Sandi.

They have also provided “caught out” kits in all of the female bathrooms, containing sanitary pads, deodorant and pants. There is a private Teams channel where employees can request to join where menopause-related information – local resources, books and information is shared, and they ran a menopause seminar for all staff, which they hope to repeat next year. “We also have an employee wellbeing room where staff can go if they need a private space. It has water, a window that can be opened, menopause-related materials, and offers a quiet private space when needed”, added Ms O’Brien.

Expanding on what other supports can be made available in the workplace, occupational health nurse Helen Farrell, who is based in Dairygold Co-op, which employs up to 1,300 people at multiple sites across Munster, emphasised the need to accommodate the person in their work environment. She said that fans, good ventilation, and rooms with adjustable temperature control were important.

She added that toilet facilities, access to cold drinking water and the choice to wear appropriate clothing for staff were helpful. “Dairygold has a flexible working policy and homeworking can be accommodated for those in positions that can avail of it”, she said. For staff wearing uniforms, lighter, layered and non-synthetic or sweat-wicking material can be of use. This was also acknowledged by Margaret, who added that white uniforms can easily stain if an employee experiences a sudden or unexpected leak.

## **MENOPAUSE POLICY**

For companies who do not have the benefit of occupational health support, it can be more challenging to put in place some of the supports and services available for larger organisations.

Dr Mary Teresa recommends more emphasis should be placed on manager training. “The manager should be approachable by the employee, and they should understand what the symptoms are, and what the company can offer the employee in relation to flexible working and other supports. They also need to know how to respond appropriately if approached and what to say. Asking the employee, ‘how can we help?’, shows a level of empathy and awareness.”

On the subject of workplace menopausal guidelines/policies, many companies have them in place, and in some instances, they are publicly available on their websites, including University College Dublin (UCD), An Garda Síochána, Bank of Ireland and Vodafone.

Menopause leave is also becoming more popular, and Bank of Ireland has introduced 10 days’ paid leave for employees experiencing menopause-related sickness. Attendance records are not affected by this.

Speaking about their policy, Bank of Ireland head of employee relations, Joanne Healy, said that “we want to build a more supportive and inclusive culture”, and their policy and employee menopause training are part of this process.

Whilst many larger organisations have workplace policies in place, they are not common across all workplaces. Some employers have expressed a reluctance to document a policy, to prevent the false expectation that all roles can be “reasonably accommodated”, or easily adjusted.

As one employer put it to HSR, whilst they would do everything possible to accommodate an employee, it may not always be possible to offer remote work, later starts or reduced hours, especially if their role involves working on a production line, is customer-facing or on a shop floor.

As the conversation around menopause continues to grow, employers, safety, occupational health and HR professionals will also continue to gain an understanding of what employees are looking for, which predominantly revolves around flexible working, and better education. Having an approachable line manager, and being able to signpost employees to further information and support is also beneficial.

It is also worth noting research shows there are clear benefits to having an inclusive and compassionate menopause policy, all of which can help protect employee wellbeing in the workplace.

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For more information on managing menopause in the workplace and upcoming related events, see:

- The Impact of Menopausal Symptoms on Work and Careers study: <https://tinyurl.com/4p828y75>
- Irish Government menopause website <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/menopause/>
- Menopause in the Workplace Survey: [www.themenopausehub.ie](http://www.themenopausehub.ie)
- Menopause Summit, Saturday October 14th 2023, Dún Laoghaire, Dublin: <https://www.menopausesuccesssummit.com/>
- National Menopause Summit, Friday October 20th 2023, City Hall Cork: <https://nationalmenopausesummit.com/>
- Guidance on menopause and the workplace (Faculty of Occupational Medicine) <http://www.fom.ac.uk/health-at-work-2/information-for-employers/dealing-with-health-problems-in-the-workplace/advice-on-the-menopause>

**\*Margaret Kirby's article first appeared in Health and Safety Review (HSR) October 2023 ([www.healthandsafetyreview.ie](http://www.healthandsafetyreview.ie)). HSR is a sister publication of IRN.**

