



Guidance on menopause and work

so that workers in the menopause
can work sustainably.

A guide from the Labour Foundation
in collaboration with the Ministry of Social
Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of
Public Health, Welfare and Sport

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Colophon

The Labour Foundation, founded in 1945, is a national consultative body of the central organizations of employers and employees in the Netherlands. Currently represented in the Foundation are the Association VNO-NCW, the Royal Dutch Association of small and medium-sized enterprises (MKB-Nederland), the Dutch Federation of Agricultural and Horticultural Organizations (LTO Nederland), Netherlands Trade Unions Federation (FNV), National Federation of Christian Trade Unions in the Netherlands CNV) and the Trade Union Federation for Professionals (VCP).

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Introduction

Menopause is an important and often undiscussed topic, in society and therefore also in the workplace. Every woman¹ has to deal with menopause and many women experience physical and mental complaints during the menopause period. More than one in three menopausal women indicate that they are less able to do their work due to their complaints. Less than half of this group discusses complaints at work (RIVM). Due to social ignorance of the consequences of the menopause, there is often little attention to it in the workplace or there is a taboo on discussing this subject. As a result, employees do not always feel supported and employers cannot take appropriate measures.

With this guide, the Labour Foundation wants to contribute to breaking the taboo and offer employers and employees tools to discuss the menopause and ensure an inclusive and healthy working environment. The guide contains practical tips and information for employers and employees to recognize, discuss and deal with the menopause in the workplace. Everyone in the workplace benefits from this; by making it a topic of discussion and making possible adjustments, sick leave or work loss can be prevented. Moreover, it is part of good employer practice to pay attention to this subject. As an employer, you make yourself attractive and use this to attract and retain talent.

The guide was drawn up by the Labour Foundation, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS). The research results and figures mentioned can be found in appendix 1 of this document.

¹ The Labour Foundation is aware that not all women experience physical and mental complaints during the menopause period and not all menopausal people identify as women. In this guide, the term women is used for anyone who experiences menopausal symptoms.

Chapter 1 – Menopause and work

What does it mean?

Menopause is the period in which a woman may experience complaints due to hormonal changes. A changing menstrual pattern is a specific expression of these hormonal changes. This period includes the years surrounding the menopause, also called peri-menopause. Menopause is the last menstrual period in a woman's life. The period starting from one year after the last menstrual period is called postmenopause. Menopause therefore concerns a longer period in a woman's life that can last an average of seven to ten years. There are even examples where the complaints do not go away.

During menopause a change in sex hormones occurs, i.e. the production of estrogen and progesterone decreases. As a result of these hormonal changes, women may experience complaints. Research shows that the vast majority, approximately 80%, of menopausal women experience complaints to a greater or lesser extent.

What could be bothering women during menopause?

Menopausal symptoms can include a multitude of physical and psychological symptoms, which can vary considerably from individual to individual. The severity and duration of the complaints also differs between individuals. In general, (severe) menopausal complaints often affect the mental and physical health of women.

The most common complaints are hot flashes, insomnia and mood swings. In addition, many menopausal women suffer from concentration and memory problems, depressed or anxious feelings, irritability, a feeling of agitation or nervousness, fatigue or lethargy. Joint pain, muscle pain, headache and palpitations also occur.

Menopausal symptoms are often not properly recognized for a number of reasons. Some of the symptoms mentioned above are non-specific complaints; i.e. these are complaints that are not only characteristic of menopause. Moreover, the fact that the menopause can lead to a multitude of complaints is not widely known. This means that women, but also doctors, do not always recognize menopausal symptoms. Menopausal complaints are occasionally confused with other health problems such as cardiovascular problems, sleep problems or (work-related) psychological complaints such as stress, tension and psychological fatigue due to work.

Confusion with the diagnosis of burnout due to work stress

Especially with the symptoms of stress, the diagnosis of stress, burnout or psychological fatigue due to work is often incorrect. Menopausal symptoms can lead to overstrain and stress. Then the diagnosis of stress or burnout is a correct diagnosis, but the cause of the stress is not work stress, but the menopause (reduced physical and mental capacity). It is therefore important not to rely blindly on the main diagnosis, but to look further at what the cause of the complaints is. An incorrect or incomplete diagnosis hinders proper treatment, gives women the feeling of not being understood or heard and can even worsen the complaints.

Where does that lead?

Menopausal symptoms can last for several years and, due to their nature and severity, often have an impact on daily life. Every year, more than 170,000 women in the Netherlands experience menopausal complaints to such an extent that these complaints affect their work. Many complaints could be alleviated if the employer had a better understanding of the situation, the complaints were recognized as menopausal complaints, and it is examined how the employee can be accommodated so that she can continue to work optimally. Almost half of women with menopausal complaints indicate that they are physically or mentally less able to perform their work properly. Women function less well due to, for example, pain complaints, fatigue or concentration problems and therefore have lower productivity. They also need longer to recover after a working day. Not only can menopausal complaints have a negative impact on work ability, work performance and the execution of the work, but working conditions, such as stress and work pressure, can also influence the severity of the complaints. Women with (severe) menopausal symptoms are therefore absent six to eight times more often than women who have little or no symptoms.

About a third of women with menopausal symptoms experience uncomfortable situations at work due to hot flashes, heavy sweating, mood swings or heavy blood loss. These situations cause shame or uncertainty and regularly lead to stress and poorer concentration. Women with (severe) menopausal complaints more often have sleep disorders and therefore suffer from poorer mental health, are three times more likely to suffer from psychological fatigue due to work and are more likely to experience depressive feelings than women who do not or only occasionally experience menopausal complaints.

Taboo or unknown

Unfortunately, many women do not have the opportunity to discuss their menopausal complaints at work. There is still a taboo on menopause and women are afraid of stigmatization or discrimination if they are open about their complaints. People are also reluctant to discuss it because of prejudices and the fear of consequences for their career. Furthermore, there is still a lot of unknowns about menopausal symptoms, which means that both women themselves and managers do not always realize that symptoms are related to menopause. Almost half of women discuss menopausal complaints at work. The majority of women talk about this with colleagues and only one in six women discusses this with their manager. Only one in twenty women discusses her menopausal complaints and their effects at work with an independent person at work such as a company doctor, company social worker or a confidential counsellor. However, women do need more support and understanding in the workplace, for example from a manager or company doctor. Social support and small adjustments at work or in the working environment often make a big difference for women with menopausal complaints.

Preventing sick leave due to illness

The severity and nature of menopausal complaints, their influence on work and the lack of support and understanding often lead to absenteeism in women with (severe) menopausal complaints. These women report sick twice as often as their female colleagues without menopausal complaints. They more often take short-term sick leave for complaints such as headaches and are also more likely to be absent for a long period of time. Women in menopause are more likely to experience a depressive period and, in particular, the combination of menopausal symptoms and depressive or anxious feelings and sadness can lead to long-term sick leave. For example, women with (severe) menopausal symptoms suffer from stress more often than women in the same age group without these symptoms.

Sick leave could partly be prevented or reduced if women and those around them were well informed about the menopause and what this could mean for their health and ability to work. A correct diagnosis by a (company) doctor, good medical treatment and adjustments in work and in the workplace contribute to this. Moreover, better discussion at work in a safe working environment ensures that measures can be taken so that a woman with menopausal complaints can continue to work as pleasantly as possible.

Coming out

Until nine months ago, I knew that the menopause was coming. Years ago I had bought a book in preparation. It's called 'Opvliegeren' (Dutch title that literally translates to 'hot flashing'), funny title too, and it's all there: everything that can happen to you during the menopause. I have a mother and friends of the same age, so I knew the stories too. I had been bracing myself for years, but for a long time I seemed like the only woman in the world to whom it didn't happen. Until the beginning of this year. I think it's a blessing that the menstruation stops, but it's much worse than expected. I've been angry too. Why didn't anyone tell me it was so bad. That funny title of that book also made me grumpy. Hot flashes don't cover it at all. I get a little nauseous several times a day. This is followed by intense heat build-up, followed by uncontrollable sweating. Then the cooling and the chills. Sleeping through the night now seems to be a thing of the past. Several times at night I stand next to my bed to dry myself. Just looking at a bowl of chips makes the pounds pile on. And I'm so tired sometimes. But I only complain at home. Because despite everything I can still do my job. I have control over my work and have options to regulate it. And if the lack of sleep gets to me, I take it easy for a day. That should be possible for every woman. Even if you work in healthcare, education or cleaning. Because every woman goes through this phase, even if you keep hoping that it will pass you by. In some women the complaints are much worse, with muscle and joint pain, for example. Recognition, understanding and room for regulation must be created in the workplace. And medals, because it is a miracle that women in crucial professions manage to work at all. I had to be almost 60 to realize that.

Kitty Jong (vice-president of FNV, The Netherlands Trade Union Confederation)



Chapter 2 – Openness about menopause at work

The Labour Foundation encourages employers and employees to break the taboo on menopause in the workplace. This can be an important step to promote an inclusive and pleasant working environment. This chapter contains some steps that employers and employees can take.

What an employer can do:

- **Be informed:** An employer who is informed about what the menopause is and what complaints may be related to the menopause is well able to support employees where necessary and understand the situation.
- **Proactive conversation:** Be open to having an open conversation in which the employee can express her needs. Take into account the fact that different people have different needs.
- **Create an open communication culture in the workplace:** An employer can play a role in this by communicating openly and honestly and showing respect and understanding for other opinions and views.
- **Pay attention to menopausal complaints during periodic health examinations:** By paying attention to the menopause during periodic health examinations, menopausal complaints can be recognized earlier.
- **Offer flexibility:** Employers can offer flexibility in working hours, workload and workplace to enable employees to cope with symptoms of menopause. This may include flexible working hours, the option of working from home and breaks.
- **Provide access to information and resources:** Employers can make reliable information and resources available to employees about the menopause. This can be done via internal communication channels, informative brochures, websites or access to professional healthcare. Larger companies could appoint a menopause consultant in consultation with the company doctor.
- **Preventive consultation hours:** Organizations can organize a preventive consultation hour with the company doctor specifically for women aged 45 and older, for example. Menopausal symptoms can also have long-term health effects. It is therefore important to be alert to health problems that may arise around menopause or conditions that may increase the risk of medical problems. For example, the risk of cardiovascular disease in women with many hot flashes.
- **Implement workplace adjustments:** Workplace adjustments support employees experiencing symptoms of menopause. This may include, for example, setting up cooler work spaces, flexible dress codes, extra breaks, access to drinking water or sanitary facilities such as sanitary towels in the toilets.

- Consider flexible dress codes: Employers may consider implementing flexible dress codes that allow employees to wear clothing that is comfortable during menopause. Natural, breathable fabrics such as cotton and linen may be preferable to synthetic fabrics.
- Consider a vitality program: An employer with an active vitality program, such as offering a sports subscription and offering free fruit, can contribute to the vitality of employees. Consider including 'vitality during menopause' within the vitality programme. Especially with menopausal complaints, exercise, nutrition, relaxation, sleep, quitting smoking and reducing alcohol are important points of attention. At the same time, there is a greater need for good support with exercise programs because women with menopausal complaints also more often have muscle and joint complaints.
- Consider starting a special program about the menopause: In collaboration with the company doctor/occupational health and safety service, offer workshops on the menopause for employees, train all managers on how to deal with menopausal complaints in the workplace and ensure a solid occupational health and safety network. This can be done, for example, by making appointments with a menopause clinic and menopause consultants.

Employer perspective

Menopause is no unknown territory for me. In my cleaning company, more than 90 percent of the employees are women. A large number of them have been with us for a long time and are now around 50 years old. It is therefore not surprising that we pay close attention to the variety of complaints that women can have as a result of menopause.

This way, our employees can contact a menopause consultant and we can discuss what someone needs in close consultation. This is always tailor-made, because the nature, severity and duration of menopausal symptoms vary widely. Some people come away with some hot flashes, while for others they are so drastic - physically and psychologically - that normal functioning is almost impossible.

It is a common interest of employer and employee to do the right thing here. It is important for employers to realize that never before have so many women of 'menopause age' been active in the labour market as now. As an employer you will sooner or later have to deal with this with certainty. It is therefore good that we as social partners have produced this guideline. It contributes to awareness of what this means and - especially - what we can do together.

In any case, it starts with an open culture in which women feel safe and confident to raise the subject with their employer or the HR department if desired. The figures show that this does not always happen. Many women find it difficult to discuss their complaints and their impact on work, especially with a man. And I understand that too. As an employer you must also be aware of this. Just because you don't hear about it doesn't mean it isn't happening. Therefore, see what you can actively do, for example through the company doctor or an external menopause consultant.

Women are indispensable in every respect. I wish every woman to get through this phase as best as possible, including at work.

Jacco Vonhof (entrepreneur and president of entrepreneurs' organization MKB-Nederland)



What an employee can do:

- Bring up the topic at work: As an employee, you can bring up what you need at work during this period of your life with your manager, HR representative or colleagues. That can be quite exciting because of the fear of stigmatization. The menopause, the complaints and their influence on work should not be a taboo subject. Only then is it possible to deliver customized solutions as a manager. By talking openly about your own experiences, you can also encourage others to be open and break the taboo.
- Look for information and help: As an employee, you can look for reliable information and resources about the menopause yourself. This can range from books and online resources to consulting medical professionals. Dutch-speaking women can look at the '*Arboportaal*', where there are several useful sources, including [an English study](#) on global consensus recommendations on menopause in the workplace.
- Contact the company doctor: the company doctor is the expert in the field of work and health. The company doctor can identify the complaints, screen for important conditions that occur more often during the menopause and discuss whether further examinations and whether a referral are necessary. The company doctor can help you discuss adjustments at work.
- Discuss workplace adjustments: If symptoms of menopause are experienced that impact work, consider discussing workplace adjustments with the supervisor or HR representative. This may include, for example, flexible working hours, breaks or other adjustments that help you continue to do your job well.
- Seek support from colleagues: Talk to colleagues who are also experiencing the menopause or find a mentor or buddy to talk to and share experiences. This can help you feel supported and understood.
- Discuss clothing needs with the employer: If you notice that clothing has an impact on comfort at work, consider discussing this with the employer. Agreements may be made about flexible dress codes or other adjustments.

Wish for the future

Just as every girl knows that she will get her period at some point, every woman knows that it will stop at some point. And then you have to deal with it: the menopause. Some people suffer from it more than others. We know that it is a personally intense process, and we now also know that it leads to obstacles in daily life and therefore also at work. As a young forty-year-old, I am not yet ready to go through menopause. However, I am starting to notice that alcohol has a different effect and I hear from slightly older friends who now doubt whether they have a burnout or menopausal complaints... I notice that knowledge is important in this, knowledge that must be made available to all women. I am surprised at the lack of this in a well-educated country like the Netherlands in the 21st century. That we do not have a good understanding of a subject that affects half of the population, not even among professionals such as company doctors. That is why this guide is so important, because it is a step in the right direction in providing necessary knowledge. I have a job where I can largely manage my own agenda and determine my working hours. I have control and control options. So when the time actually comes, I can take this into account. Unfortunately, in daily practice I regularly see that no account is taken of the phases of life that people are in, and therefore also of women in menopause. That few possibilities for regulation are organized and that there is little or no control at the individual level. With all its consequences: such as sick leave, working less or a career change. Not good for women, who take on a financial risk and often do less well in terms of wages and pension accrual. It is problematic that this subject is not automatically taken into account in order to retain valuable experienced people in a labour market with many vacancies. My wish would be that by the time I am actually in the menopause, there will not only be room for control for me, but that the menopause will receive standard attention, personal needs will become increasingly open to discussion and there will be less of a taboo on this subject. This makes sure that customization can also be safely discussed between employer and employee in this phase of life.

Daniëlle Woestenberg (President of CNV Education and board member of CNV, the Christian National Trade Union Federation)



Chapter 3 – Role of the company doctor and the general practitioner

As an employee, it is important to contact the company doctor if health complaints arise during the menopause that affect work and working conditions. The company doctor can also be called in for a preventive consultation when there are no complaints yet or only some mild first symptoms. This conversation is confidential.

If there are symptoms that affect work, such as hot flashes, joint pain, fatigue, concentration problems, mood swings, or other complaints that affect functioning at work, the company doctor can advise on possible adjustments at the workplace, in work schedules, workload, and other measures to promote working comfort and productivity. The company doctor can also refer to the general practitioner and/or the menopause clinic if necessary.

An employee can always contact their doctor if they have health problems during the menopause. That is why it is good to also read the information on [GPinfo.nl](https://www.gpinfo.nl). GPinfo.nl offers the necessary information for women about menopause, health complaints and what to do about them yourself and what the GP can do.

Appendix – Reference to websites and documents (in Dutch)

Bendien, Elena e.a.: Werken aan de overgang. Een uitgebreide literatuurstudie naar overgang, menopauze, gezondheid, en werk (Amsterdam 2019).

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