

# Workplace menopause study finds 'women feel they need to cope alone'

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A call for more menopause-friendly workplaces is made in a new Government report prepared by a team from the University of Leicester.

In the most comprehensive study of its kind, the report reveals that 'many women tend to feel that they need to cope alone'—because of 'a reluctance to speak up at work'. The report 'The effects of [menopause transition](#) on women's economic participation in the UK' was funded by the Government's Equalities Office.

The research, published by the Department for Education, was carried out by Joanna Brewis, Andrea Davies and Jesse Matheson of the University of Leicester School of Business and Vanessa Beck of the University of Bristol School of Economics, Finance and Management.

Its key findings and recommendations included:

- Employers can do a great deal to intervene to reduce problems for mid-life women workers, including making low cost environmental changes like the provision of USB fans and introducing flexible working patterns so women can cope better with menopause-related sleep loss.
- That compared to other reproductive stages such as pregnancy and maternity, menopause is not well understood in or catered for in UK workplaces
- There is a social responsibility case for greater organisational attention to transition, in order to ensure mid-life women have

the highest possible quality of working life

- Cultural change programmes aimed at fostering open and supportive workplace environments around menopause transition are the foundation on which other, more tangible changes can be based
- There is a legal case for organisational attention to the menopause transition
- There are economic costs of transition for women as well as employers, but the most significant evidence gaps exist around the business or economic case for organisational attention to transition
- One specific gap is the absence of any estimates at all for the costs of transition in the UK for women's economic participation. This is important in continuing to develop the business case for organisational attention to menopause transition

Professor Jo Brewis, who was the lead author of the study from the University of Leicester, said: "On the basis of our combined research expertise in gender, age, the body and health economics as they pertain to the workplace, we were delighted to win Government Equalities Office funding to compile this report and to see it published.

"The report discusses a wealth of literature on a range of [menopause symptoms](#) but also highlights the complexity and diversity in women's experiences of menopause transition. It outlines possible ways in which to enable women's continued participation in the [labour market](#) and identifies key evidence gaps relating to menopause transition, the workplace and the labour market.

"Menopause transition has both negative and positive effects on working women, although there is more evidence for the former, including reduced productivity, higher rates of absenteeism and lower job satisfaction. The evidence indicates that many women find transition

symptoms, especially hot flushes, difficult to manage and that being at work can exacerbate these symptoms.

"But women tend to feel that they need to cope alone, for example because they don't want their manager or colleagues to think their performance is being affected or because they find the prospect of disclosure embarrassing. There is also some evidence of gendered ageism in organizations, a factor which requires more research."

Professor Brewis said more women in the UK were working than ever before – some 70% as it stands – but they also outnumber men in many labour market sectors, including health and social care, leisure, the professions and customer service.

Moreover women now work much later in life: indeed the largest increase in UK employment rates since the early 1990s has been amongst women of 50 and over. This is for a variety of reasons, including an ageing population more broadly, employers' efforts to retain skilled workers and increases in the state pension age. As a result, with the average age of menopause being 51, many more women in the UK now experience this natural mid-life phenomenon whilst in employment, and are managing menopause transition symptoms through their forties.

"Our report establishes the relationship between menopause transition and employment based on the available evidence for the last thirty years, in plain and accessible English," said Professor Brewis.

"Employers and managers can use the report to assist them in initiatives designed to create more menopause-friendly workplaces; and mid-life women will find the material we present reassuring as well as informative, in their working lives especially."

The researchers hope their study will have a four-fold benefit:

- inspire employers across the UK to take action on this demographically pressing issue;
- reassure mid-life working women that their experiences of menopause transition are in no way unusual;
- educate those working with mid-life women about menopause transition;
- encourage UK researchers to work to fill the numerous evidence gaps we have identified.

The report reviews 104 English language publications—the evidence base for the effects of [menopause](#) transition on [women](#)'s economic participation in the UK from 1990 to the end of March 2016.

Provided by University of Leicester

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