

# Menstruation, menstrual health, and menopause in the workplace



## Menstruation and menstrual health

Menstruation and menstrual health are still too often treated as taboo topics in the workplace. But for many workers, the menstrual cycle can affect how they feel and function on the job.

A typical menstrual cycle lasts around 28 days, but that varies from person to person. Common symptoms include bleeding, menstrual cramps, mood changes, breast tenderness, fatigue, migraines, and digestive issues.

Additional chronic menstrual-related health conditions can cause challenges for some workers. These can be painful, disruptive, and often invisible. Approximately 10% of those that menstruate are affected by endometriosis, 33% by fibroids, around 10% by polycystic ovary syndrome, and 5-8% by premenstrual dysphoric disorder. These conditions can significantly affect a worker's comfort, focus, and ability to perform their duties effectively at work.

A recent UK poll revealed that 85% of respondents feel stress or anxiety around managing their period at work, and 63% said they feel uncomfortable talking about the subject. One study of over 30,000 participants found that 13.8% reported missing work during their period, with 3.4% doing so every or almost every cycle.

## Menopause and perimenopause

Menopause marks the natural end of menstruation and typically occurs between ages 45 and 55. Perimenopause — the transition phase leading up to menopause — can start several years earlier and last 4 to 8 years on average.

Symptoms vary widely but may include:

- Heavier or irregular bleeding
- Increased menstrual cramps
- Hot flashes and night sweats
- Sleep disruptions and fatigue
- Mood changes or anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating and memory issues
- Headaches or migraines
- Joint or muscle pain
- Bladder changes and other physical discomforts

These symptoms can significantly impact work performance and attendance. Research conducted with women shows that approximately 80% experience symptoms related to this hormonal transition. For about 25%, the symptoms are severe enough to interfere with daily activities. Nearly 60% report these symptoms have had a negative impact on their work, and 30% say they have considered reducing their work hours or even leaving their job.

## **The impact of workplace conditions**

Workplace environments can make menstrual or menopausal symptoms even more difficult to manage:

- Lack of temperature control can worsen menstrual cramps or menopausal hot flashes.
- Limited restroom access or inadequate facilities can increase anxiety.
- Inflexible break schedules can prevent workers from addressing symptoms when needed.
- Uncomfortable uniforms can aggravate physical symptoms.
- Stressful work environments can intensify symptoms.

## **Lack of understanding and support**

The taboo and stigma surrounding menstruation and menopause have resulted in a lack of understanding among employers. Many managers may not fully recognize how working conditions have an impact on menstrual and menopausal health and can worsen symptoms, or how they create additional challenges for workers.

This lack of awareness often leads to:

- Workers feeling unable to discuss their symptoms
- A lack of appropriate accommodations
- Increased absenteeism
- Lower productivity and job satisfaction
- People leaving the workforce prematurely

## **The union can help**

It can be difficult to talk about menstruation or menopause with the employer. Many workers fear stigmatization, harassment, or negative impacts on their job. That's where the union can help by supporting members in starting these conversations with the employer. Let CUPE members know that they can reach out if they need help navigating discussions with their supervisor or Human Resources.

## Creating change in the workplace

The best way to support workers managing menstruation and menopause at work is through open, respectful communication that makes them feel included. That means involving them directly in identifying needs, planning improvements, and finding solutions. The following are some practical changes the union can explore with members to help advocate for a more inclusive and supportive workplace:

### Facilities and physical workspace

- Well-maintained restrooms with an adequate and easy to access supply of free menstrual products (required by law in some jurisdictions)
- Gender-neutral restrooms in addition to separate men's and women's facilities
- Access to temperature control, including the ability to adjust thermostats, have desk fans, or open windows
- Cold drinking water and cool-down areas
- Breathable uniforms with flexible sizing options
- Private rest areas where workers can manage symptoms

### Flexible work arrangements

- Adjusted working hours or options to work remotely
- Flexible start and finish times
- Split lunch breaks or the ability to take short breaks during the day
- Options for temporary reduced hours when managing severe symptoms
- Considerations for shift patterns that accommodate symptom management
- Job sharing opportunities
- Support for medical appointments related to menstrual and menopausal health

### Workplace policies and culture

- Clear health and safety policies that specifically acknowledge menstruation and menopause
- Training for managers to understand the impact of menstruation and menopause and respond appropriately
- Designated advocates or champions at senior leadership levels
- Self-help resources and employee support networks
- Workplace culture that supports open, stigma-free conversations about menstrual and menopausal health

- Accessible information on available accommodations
- Health insurance coverage (or EAP support) for treatments related to menstrual and menopausal symptoms, including alternative therapies where possible
- Workplace wellness programs that address menstrual and menopausal health

## **Bargaining for better protections**

There are several ways locals can push for better accommodations through collective bargaining. Your local executive can work with your CUPE servicing representative or health and safety specialist to develop language around the following:

### **1. Negotiate specific leave provisions:**

- Add menstrual leave provisions.
- Add menopausal leave provisions.
- Include flexible sick leave that can be used for menstrual and menopausal health issues.

### **2. Strengthen non-discrimination clauses:**

- Include menstruation and menopause in non-discrimination clauses.
- This allows for grievances and arbitration that are faster than processes under human rights legislation.

### **3. Secure flexible work arrangements:**

- Negotiate for flexible hours, remote work options, and break schedules.
- Include provisions for temporary accommodations to manage severe symptoms.

### **4. Improve workplace facilities:**

- Negotiate for adequate facilities, including access to clean rooms, free menstrual products, and temperature control.
- Ensure private spaces to manage symptoms that go above current legal requirements.

### **5. Improve health benefits:**

- Negotiate for comprehensive health coverage that includes treatments related to menstrual and menopausal symptoms.
- Secure coverage for alternative therapies that may help manage symptoms.

## 6. Provide education and training:

- Require mandatory training for managers on menstrual and menopausal health.
- Secure resources for workplace-wide education to reduce stigma.

## Conclusion

Approaches to menstrual and menopausal health will vary from one workplace to another. Your local has access to resources that can help you create a safer and more supportive environment for all workers, including those who menstruate and those experiencing menopause.

By working together, we can break down stigma, push for stronger protections and inclusive workplaces, and ensure that a natural part of life doesn't become a barrier to workplace participation and success.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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