

## What to expect when you're (not) expecting the menopause: *Some basics on menopause and work*

### **MENOPAUSE...**

- The menopause is the final menstrual period. Women are "postmenopausal" from one year after their final menstrual period and "perimenopausal" (or in the "menopause transition") from when they start to experience symptoms of menopause (such as menstrual cycle changes or hot flashes) until one year after the final menstrual period (when they are postmenopausal).
- The average age at menopause for Australian women is 51 years, although this varies by ethnicity. Asian women may experience menopause at an earlier age. Menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes usually start at around 47 years and last for around 4 years.
- Around 8% of women experience menopause early (before age 45 years) and 1% prematurely (before age 40 years). Reasons for this vary, but are commonly due to treatments for cancer or surgery to remove both ovaries. Some women have spontaneous early or premature menopause.
- Menopausal symptoms include hot flashes, night sweats and vaginal dryness. During the menopause transition, women may experience irregular and heavy menstrual bleeding.

- Menopausal symptoms may impact on work. In particular, sleep disturbance due to night sweats, hot flashes during the working day that cause embarrassment and distress, tiredness in the day which may impact on concentration and mood.
- Menopause often coincides with a time of life that is busy for many women in terms of child or aged parental caring responsibilities.
- Although nearly all women experience hot flashes and night sweats over the menopause transition, these are manageable for most women. An estimated 10-25% have symptoms which are severe and or prolonged, and these women may be more likely to experience difficulties at work.

### **AND WORK...**

- Over 2 million women in Australia, and 3.5 million in the UK are currently experiencing menopause while in paid employment.
- Most women effectively manage work over the menopause transition, but many have indicated that they would like more support from their employers.
- Workplaces can negatively influence symptom experience. The specific factors that may aggravate menopausal symptoms depend in

part on the type of work a woman does, and her occupation. But they typically include:

- Work stress, and work overload, such as extraordinary job responsibilities and unpredictable/long/inflexible working hours or working under pressure
  - Lack of job control and autonomy
  - Shift work
  - Embarrassment about visible hot flashes and sweats at work
  - Inhospitable workplace environments or sexist/ageist cultures
  - No temperature or ventilation control
  - Inability to take breaks discretely/easily
- Work can also positively influence menopausal transition in a variety of ways, such as:
    - Providing an escape from the stresses of home
    - Social support from colleagues and workplace friendships
    - Increasing self-esteem and sense of identity by being competent at work and/or retaining financial independence
    - Positive messaging surrounding menopause and mid-later working life