

Menopause Guidance Notes

The following guidance provides information and practical steps for volunteers at the MS Society who may be experiencing menopause or supporting fellow volunteers, friends or family members through it. Our goal is to create an understanding and supportive environment for everyone affected by menopause. **Appendix 1 gives specific guidance for menopause and MS.**

Table of Contents

1. What is menopause?	3
2. How might menopause affect someone?	3
3. What support is available?	3
4. Steps to take if you're affected by menopause	4
4.1. Self care	4
4.2. Talk to the Volunteer Support Team	4
4.3. Know your rights	4
5. Guidance for supporting others	4
5.1. Be informed	4
5.2. Be supportive and understanding	5
5.3. Practical support and adjustments	5
5.4. Mental health support	5
6. Creating an inclusive and understanding culture	5
7. Resources and support	6
8. Appendix 1 – Menopause and Multiple Sclerosis (MS)	6
Additional guidance	6
1. Understanding menopause and MS	6
2. How menopause may affect MS	6
3. Practical guidance for managing menopause and MS	7
4. Adjustments for individuals managing menopause and MS	7

1. What is menopause?

Menopause is a natural part of aging that occurs when a person's menstruation ceases permanently, typically between ages 45-55, although it can happen earlier or later. Early menopause, also known as premature menopause, is when menopause occurs before the age of 45. Certain treatments or interventions, such as some chemotherapy, surgery and radiation therapy, can cause medically-induced menopause, stopping the ovaries from working properly earlier than they would've naturally. Menopause can affect women, trans men and non-binary and intersex people.

There're three stages of menopause.

- **Perimenopause:** The period leading up to menopause where hormonal changes start, often marked by symptoms such as irregular periods, hot flushes and mood swings
- **Menopause:** Confirmed when menstruation has stopped for 12 consecutive months
- **Post-menopause:** The period after menopause when symptoms can persist but usually decrease in intensity

Throughout this guidance, when we refer to 'menopause' we're referring to any of the three stages

2. How might menopause affect someone?

Menopause can cause a range of symptoms, which vary between individuals. Symptoms are most likely to occur during the perimenopause phase. Some common physical and emotional symptoms include:

- Hot flushes and night sweats
- Fatigue and sleep disturbances
- Difficulty concentrating and memory issues (often referred to as 'brain fog')
- Mood swings, anxiety and depression
- Joint pain and headaches

For some, these symptoms may be mild, but for others, they can significantly impact daily life, work and volunteering.

3. What support is available?

The MS Society is committed to supporting volunteers experiencing menopause. You're encouraged to speak with the Volunteer Support Team or Volunteer Manager if you're struggling with symptoms which are affecting your volunteering. These discussions will be confidential and handled with sensitivity.

4. Steps to take if you're affected by menopause

4.1. Self-care

- **Track your symptoms:** Keeping a record of your symptoms can help you recognise patterns and identify specific triggers that exacerbate your symptoms.
- **Look after your wellbeing:** Regular exercise, maintaining a balanced diet and ensuring sufficient rest can help reduce some symptoms. Techniques such as mindfulness, yoga and breathing exercises can help manage stress and mood fluctuations.
- **Seek medical advice:** If your symptoms are severe or affecting your quality of life, consider seeking advice from a healthcare professional. They can discuss treatment options, such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or alternative treatments.

4.2. Talk to the Volunteer Support Team or your Volunteer Manager

- **Open Communication:** If you feel comfortable, have an open discussion with a member of the Volunteer Support Team or your Volunteer Manager about how menopause is affecting your volunteering. This will help them understand your needs and explore ways to support you.
- **Reasonable Adjustments:** Discuss any adjustments that could make your volunteering environment more comfortable. These could include changes to your schedule, breaks or the spaces where you volunteer.

4.3. Know your rights

The Equality Act 2010 protects against discrimination. Menopause isn't a specific protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. But if someone's put at a disadvantage and treated less favorably because of their menopause symptoms, this could be discrimination if related to a protected characteristic, for example age, disability, gender reassignment and/or sex. The MS Society ensures all volunteers are treated fairly, without discrimination. If you feel that you're being treated unfairly or if you face any challenges, speak with the Volunteer Support Team to ensure your rights are respected. Refer to our Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy and/or Dignity at Work and When Volunteering Policy for more information.

5. Guidance for supporting others

5.1. Be informed

Educate yourself about menopause and its potential effects. Everyone should know what menopause is and understand how people might be affected, even if they haven't or won't go through it themselves. Understand that it's a natural phase in life but that symptoms can vary significantly between individuals and for some, they can have a substantial impact.

5.2. Be supportive and understanding

- **Offer a listening ear:** Encourage open conversations with people who may be experiencing menopause. Ask how you can support them and listen without judgment or assumptions.
- **Maintain privacy:** Respect the confidentiality of others and don't share their situation without their permission.
- **Adjust expectations if necessary:** If someone's struggling with symptoms like fatigue or memory lapses, be flexible with their duties or deadlines where possible.

5.3. Practical support and adjustments

If someone discusses menopausal symptoms with you, be open to making practical adjustments to their volunteering conditions, such as:

- Adjusting duties or deadlines to allow individuals to manage both their symptoms and their responsibilities more effectively.
- Allowing more frequent breaks and quiet spaces for rest to manage fatigue or cognitive challenges.
- Supporting them with ways to support temperature such as using fans, being near a window etc.
- Ensuring access to cold drinking water.

5.4. Mental health support

Be aware that menopause can also affect mental health. Encourage people to access mental health services or counselling if needed.

6. Creating an inclusive and understanding culture

As an organisation, the MS Society aims to normalise conversations around menopause and remove any stigma associated with it. We encourage all volunteers to:

- **Promote awareness.** Encourage open discussions about menopause. This reduces isolation for those experiencing symptoms and fosters an environment of empathy.
- **Challenge stereotypes.** Avoid making assumptions or jokes about menopause. Recognise that symptoms can be debilitating and that everyone's experience is different.
- **Contribute to a supportive environment.** Whether you're experiencing menopause yourself or supporting someone else, small changes in attitude and awareness can make a big difference in ensuring people's experience is inclusive and supportive.

7. Resources and support

For more support, you can access the following resources.

- **The Volunteer Support Team:** For discussing adjustments or any concerns you may have, please phone: 0300 500 8084 (select option #3) or email volunteersupport@mssociety.org.uk
- **External support:** Speak to your GP or a healthcare professional for medical advice regarding menopause symptoms and treatments or access

Further information:

- [NHS website \(Menopause Help and Support\)](#)
- [Women's Health Concern](#)
- [Menopause Matters](#)
- [Daisy Network for premature menopause](#)
- [Menopause Café](#)
- [Queermenopause for people who're LGBTQ+](#)

Remember: You're not alone. Menopause is a natural life stage, and the MS Society is committed to supporting all volunteers through this period with understanding, compassion and practical solutions.

8. Appendix 1 – Menopause and Multiple Sclerosis (MS)

Additional guidance

Menopause and MS can present unique challenges, but with the right support, individuals can effectively manage both conditions. The MS Society is dedicated to providing an inclusive, supportive environment where everyone has access to the resources they need to thrive.

This appendix provides additional information and practical steps for volunteers at the MS Society who have MS and may be experiencing menopause or supporting others with MS through it.

1. Understanding menopause and MS

For individuals with MS, menopause can interact with their condition in complex ways, sometimes intensifying certain MS symptoms or creating new challenges.

2. How menopause may affect MS

While every individual's experience is different, some common ways in which menopause might interact with MS include the following.

- **Increased fatigue:** Menopause and MS can cause significant fatigue, which may become more severe during the perimenopausal and menopausal stages.
- **Cognitive changes:** Menopause can lead to memory issues, brain fog or difficulty concentrating. These symptoms can overlap with cognitive symptoms of MS, potentially worsening cognitive challenges.
- **Mood swings and emotional health:** Hormonal fluctuations during menopause can cause mood swings, anxiety or depression. People with MS may already be prone to mood changes, and menopause may exacerbate these emotional challenges.
- **Hot flushes and heat sensitivity:** Hot flushes, a hallmark of menopause, may worsen MS symptoms, particularly for those with Uhthoff's phenomenon, where heat sensitivity can cause temporary worsening of neurological symptoms.
- **Sleep disturbances:** Insomnia or disturbed sleep due to menopause can worsen fatigue, cognitive difficulties and mood issues for individuals with MS.
- **Bladder and bowel issues:** Menopause may increase bladder or bowel problems, which are already common in MS.
- **Muscle pain and joint issues:** Menopause can cause muscle aches and joint pain, which can add to the mobility and spasticity challenges faced by people with MS.

3. Practical guidance for managing menopause and MS

Managing both menopause and MS requires a comprehensive approach that considers each person's individual symptoms. The MS Society provides guidance on MS and menopause: <https://www.mssociety.org.uk/about-ms/what-is-ms/women-and-ms/menopause-and-ms>.

4. Adjustments for individuals managing menopause and MS

The MS Society is committed to supporting volunteers who're managing both MS and menopause symptoms. See section 5.3 for more information.

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