



Health

Ensuring women's wellbeing at work

Guidance for MPs' offices

AXA Health is working to improve awareness of the importance of women’s wellbeing at work, and we hope this guidance for MPs and their staff is a helpful resource to foster a supportive and inclusive work environment.

This guide prepared by AXA Health with guidance from Fawcett Society and Bloody Good Period provides background information and actionable recommendations to support women’s wellbeing in your parliamentary and constituency office, focusing on three key areas: **menstruation, menopause and fertility**.

Getting it right for women’s health issues leads to an improved quality of life for women, encouraging them to remain in the workforce, preventing missed opportunities for women’s careers and supporting businesses and the economy.

While this guide refers to ‘women’, we want to be clear that this is inclusive of all people who would benefit from the information.

1. Menstruation and endometriosis

Menstruation can impact women differently, with some experiencing significant discomfort or other symptoms that can affect their work, while it doesn’t affect some women at all.

Bloody Good Period¹ highlight how one of the major issues when fighting for menstrual equity is that so many people are embarrassed, awkward, and uncomfortable discussing periods. Furthermore, in the majority of workplaces, many people are navigating menstrual shame and access to products, which can have a real effect on people’s workplace wellbeing and professional success.

Menstrual pain, also known as dysmenorrhea, can manifest in various ways and impact women differently. The symptoms can range from mild to severe and often influence daily activities, including work.

The proposed requirement for large firms to publish and implement menopause action plans should be extended to menstruation and fertility.

Common symptoms of period pain include:

- **Abdominal pain and cramps:** Abdominal pain and cramps are usually located in the lower abdomen. The pain can range from a dull, throbbing sensation to intense cramping. It often starts 1-2 days before menstruation and may last for 2-4 days.
- **Fatigue:** Fatigue involves feeling unusually tired or exhausted. This can affect concentration, energy levels, and overall productivity.
- **Dizziness and light-headedness:** Dizziness and light-headedness involve feeling faint or unsteady. This can interfere with the ability to perform tasks safely and efficiently.

Impact on work and daily life:

- **Concentration:** Pain and discomfort can make it hard to focus.
- **Productivity:** Frequent breaks or reduced efficiency due to symptoms.
- **Attendance:** Severe symptoms might necessitate taking time off work.
- **Physical tasks:** Difficulty performing tasks that require physical exertion or prolonged standing.

For some women, menstruation is further complicated by conditions like **adenomyosis** and others such as **endometriosis** where tissue similar to the uterine lining grows outside the uterus, causing severe pain and potential infertility. Symptoms of endometriosis include chronic pelvic pain, painful periods, and fatigue.

These are our recommendations to support women going through menstruation and living with conditions such as endometriosis and adenomyosis.

Recommendations:

- **Flexible breaks:** Allow women to take short, unscheduled breaks if they experience severe symptoms, recognising the demanding nature of parliamentary work.
- **Remote work options:** Offer the possibility of remote work during menstruation, especially if symptoms are debilitating and the parliamentary schedule permits.
- **Access to facilities:** Ensure easy access to sanitary products and comfortable, private facilities for managing menstruation within the office environment.

Practical steps:

- Provide sanitary products in the office, ensuring these are readily available without the need for staff to request them. The Parliamentary estate intends to supply bathrooms with sanitary products, but having a supply in the office accessible to women helps to create an environment supportive of women.
- Foster an open and respectful culture where women can discuss their needs without stigma. Encourage an open-door policy where staff feel comfortable approaching the MP or senior staff with concerns or suggestions.
- Ensure that, as an employer, you have an understanding of menstrual health and its impact, including conditions like endometriosis.

Understanding and accommodating the unique challenges of menstruation and conditions such as endometriosis can make a significant difference in the well-being and productivity of all employees. Bloody Good Period have produced a report² on Understanding Experiences of Periods as a way to shed light on the consequences of hiding menstruation away, and what can be done to create change.

Many people are navigating menstrual shame and access to products, which can have a real effect on people’s workplace wellbeing and professional success.



2. Menopause

Understanding menopause

AXA Health reports³ that three out of four women experience menopause symptoms and as many as one in four have serious symptoms. A report⁴ by the Fawcett Society⁵ found that **one in ten** women who worked during the menopause left a job due to their symptoms, and **eight out of ten** women say their employer hasn't shared information, trained staff, or put in place a menopause absence policy.

Perimenopause refers to the transitional phase that typically begins several years before menopause, although the exact duration can vary from woman to woman. Perimenopause is when women's hormone levels start to change, but before their periods stop completely. It can cause a wide range of symptoms, both physically and mentally, such as irregular periods, hot flushes, night sweats and mood changes.

Menopause can bring a range of symptoms, including hot flushes, mood changes, and sleep disturbances, which can affect a woman's comfort and performance at work. Over The Bloody Moon has created a toolkit⁶ as a way of providing a visual of associated menopause signs.


Recommendations:

- **Temperature control:** Allow flexibility in office temperature settings (if possible) or provide personal fans/heaters for individual comfort, recognising that the age of parliamentary buildings may have varying temperature control options.
- **Flexible work arrangements:** Offer flexible working hours or the option to work from home to manage symptoms, particularly during quieter parliamentary sessions. Following their report on Menopause and the Workplace, the Fawcett Society call for making flexible work the default.
- **Supportive resources:** Provide access to resources such as health information or support groups such as the Women's Health Concern⁷ that specifically focus on menopause. These resources can empower women to manage their symptoms effectively while continuing to perform at work.

Practical steps:

- **Educate all employees** about menopause to foster a supportive and understanding environment, integrating this education into regular staff training sessions.
- **Review and adapt workplace policies** to ensure they accommodate the needs of menopausal women, ensuring that these policies are clearly communicated and accessible.

Over The Bloody Moon offers further resources⁸ to support people transitioning through menopause or simply wanting to get prepared.



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3 in 4

Women experience menopause symptoms and as many as one in four have serious symptoms.

8 in 10

Women say their employer hasn't shared information, trained staff, or put in place a menopause policy.

3. Fertility

Understanding fertility needs

With 3.5 million people⁹ in the UK affected by infertility, women may experience various fertility-related challenges at different stages of their lives. These challenges can include undergoing treatments such as in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), managing miscarriages, or making family planning decisions. Fertility issues are common, with approximately 1 in 7 couples¹⁰ in the UK having trouble conceiving. These challenges can have a profound emotional impact, affecting both a woman's mental and physical health. Therefore, it is essential to create a supportive environment that acknowledges and accommodates these needs.

Women undergoing IVF and other fertility treatments often face a range of symptoms and side effects, including:

- **Physical symptoms:** The hormone injections used in IVF can cause bloating, cramping, headaches, breast tenderness, fatigue and can also cause mood swings. The stress and uncertainty of fertility treatments has been described as a “rollercoaster of hope”.
- **Impact on daily life:** Frequent, unpredictable medical appointments and the physical side effects of treatment can disrupt daily routines and work schedules.

The recommendations aim to foster a more inclusive, understanding, and supportive environment for any employees dealing with fertility-related challenges.

3.5M

People in the UK affected by infertility

1 in 7

Couples in the UK have trouble conceiving.

Recommendations:

- **Flexible scheduling:** Providing flexible working hours or remote work options can significantly support staff who may need to attend medical appointments related to fertility treatments. This flexibility ensures that employees can manage their professional responsibilities alongside their personal health needs without compromising either.
- **Leave policies:** The Fawcett Society¹¹ emphasises that the simplest way to improve access to the workforce for women is through flexible work. Implement compassionate leave policies for fertility treatments and recovery and ensure these are communicated clearly and are accessible to all staff members.
- **Confidentiality:** Ensure that discussions and disclosures about fertility issues are handled with the utmost confidentiality and sensitivity, respecting the privacy of your staff. Research by the Fawcett Society¹² showed four in five women (80%) claim it's important for workplaces to facilitate open and safe conversations around fertility.
- **Non-carrying partners:** Fertility treatments take a toll on nonpregnant partners. Ensure your policy also supports non-carrying partners.

Practical steps:

- **Awareness:** Schedule regular, informal check-ins to provide employees with the opportunity to discuss their needs comfortably.
- **Accessible:** Place the policy in a prominent, easily accessible location, ensuring it is not buried within the maternity policy and is clearly presented.
- **Staff training:** Ensure that line managers are comprehensively trained to understand the physical, mental, and financial impacts of treatment on employees, as well as the typical requirements, enabling them to provide effective support.

Resources such as information on navigating fertility at work¹³ are available on the Fawcett Society website.

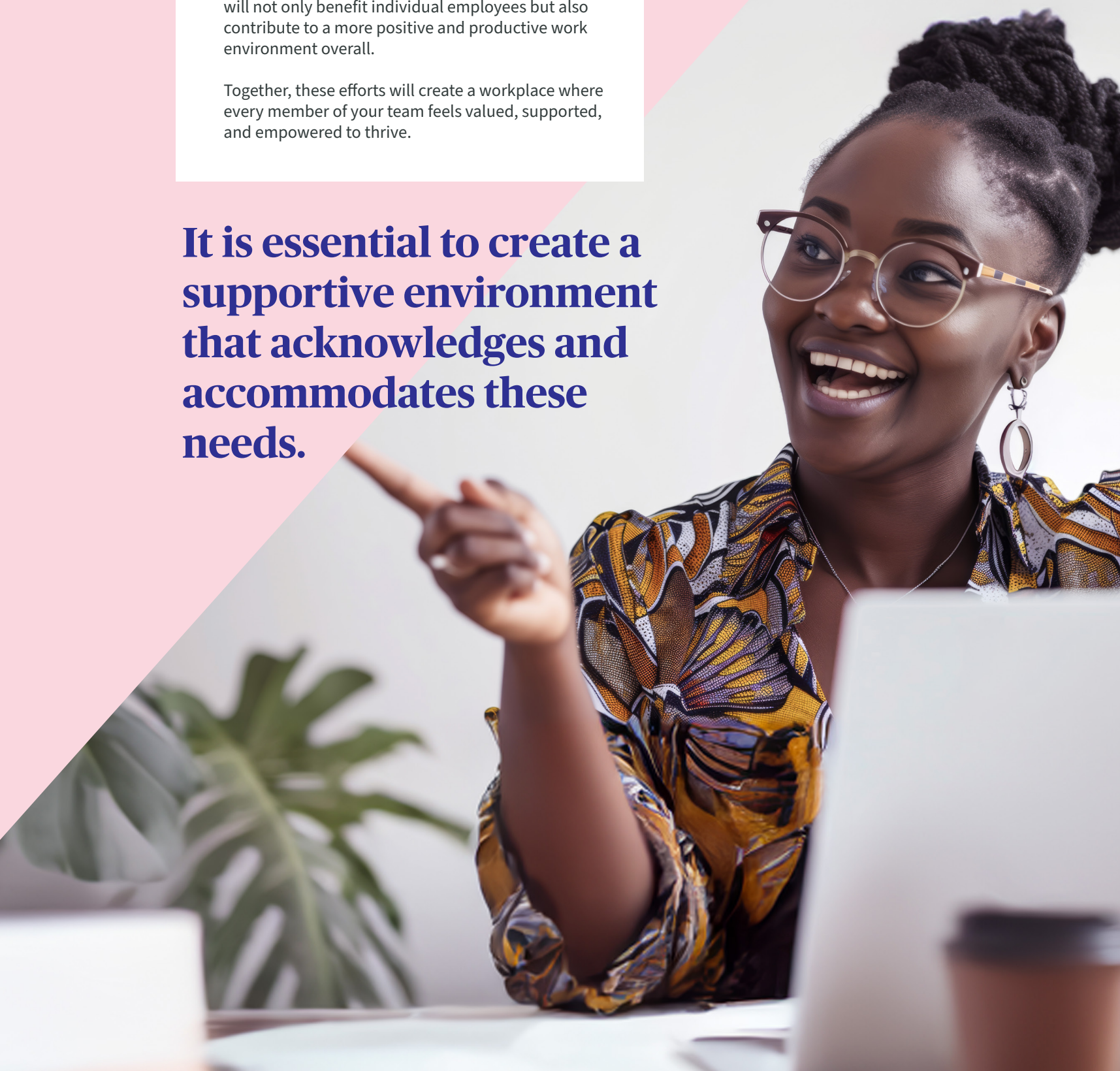
Conclusion

Fostering a workplace environment that prioritises women's wellbeing is not just about implementing policies; it requires a commitment to open communication and a supportive culture.

By addressing these aspects from day one and ensuring that women's health concerns are taken seriously and without fear of judgment, you can significantly enhance workplace health, productivity, and equity within your office. Embracing inclusivity and flexibility in how you approach these issues will not only benefit individual employees but also contribute to a more positive and productive work environment overall.

Together, these efforts will create a workplace where every member of your team feels valued, supported, and empowered to thrive.

It is essential to create a supportive environment that acknowledges and accommodates these needs.



References

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