



STEWARDS CORNER

Monthly Newsletter for Union Stewards

Supporting Members Through Menopause

“Every single person is on this earth because of menstruation, but we make half of the population pay for it.” Jen Gunter, MD

Menopause, or the permanent ending of menstruation, affects all women – usually around age 51, but it can happen anytime in a woman’s 40s or 50s. That means that most women will experience menopause while they are employed.

Even though menopause is seldom discussed as a workplace issue, it should be. Any issue that affects [more than 50% of the workforce](#) needs to be addressed.

Although each person may be different, common symptoms of menopause can include:

- ▶ Hot flashes
- ▶ Headaches
- ▶ Sleep disruption and fatigue
- ▶ Mood swings, anxiety and irritability
- ▶ Aches and pains
- ▶ Urinary problems
- ▶ Short term memory loss
- ▶ Dry skin and eyes

In looking at this list, it should be clear that each of the symptoms associated with menopause may also be experienced by people with other medical conditions. That means that every solution implemented to address women’s challenges during menopause will also be helpful to other workers with similar symptoms.

What Can We Do?

Most people have had the experience of going into work not feeling 100%. When it is an occasional occurrence caused by personal health issues, it is assumed we will just power through it. But when the symptoms are widespread or long-lasting, as is often the case with menopause, that’s when our union should step in – just like we would for any other safety and health concern.

It’s important to note that natural menopause (as a consequence of aging) is not considered to be a disability under the law in either the U.S. or Canada. However, someone who experiences menopause as a result of another condition, or a treatment like chemotherapy, may be covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or Accessible Canada Act (ACA). Also, just because natural menopause is not a recognized disorder doesn’t mean that we can’t ask the employer to make an accommodation. Remember: if we don’t ask, the answer is always no!

Each local union has its own process for addressing safety and health complaints. This often includes engaging our safety and health committees or full-time safety representatives, and filing grievances for violations of the collective bargaining

agreement. Menopause concerns can be handled under the same mechanisms.

It is important to look at the list of symptoms (and any additional symptoms that members have reported) and use it as a starting point to identify workplace conditions that contribute to making the symptom worse. Interviewing or surveying women in the workplace is a great way to collect information on their site-specific concerns.

Top 7 workplace factors influencing the severity of symptoms

- High temperature
- Poor ventilation
- Humidity
- No access to quiet area/space
- Dry air
- Lack of light
- Noise issues

Identifying Possible Workplace Solutions

Once members’ concerns and the offending working conditions have been identified, it is time to begin the work of collecting possible solutions to demand of the employer. As always, it is critical to involve the people affected by the problem to get their ideas on solutions and to get their input on any suggestions the committee or union leadership may have.

The following list of potential solutions for some menopause-related problems comes from the USW publication [Raising the Bar on Women’s Health and Safety](#):

- ▶ **Toilet access and breaks.** Increase access to toilets both in terms of location and time allowed to use them.
- ▶ **Personal protective equipment (PPE).** PPE that contributes to hot flashes and sweating should be re-evaluated.
- ▶ **Standing at work.** Prolonged standing at work is dangerous for many, including menopausal women. It can cause discomfort – but worse, studies show it can contribute to increased risk of heart attack or stroke. Allowing work while seated should be explored for each affected task.
- ▶ **Workplace temperature.** Hot workplaces make hot flashes worse. Increased ventilation, cooling systems, breaks, and cooler clothing options may help workers cope with hot flashes.
- ▶ **Inflexible hours.** Menopausal women are known to experience sleep disruption and fatigue. Where possible, flexibility in work hours can allow women to achieve better



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sleep and perform better while at work.

NOTE: The United Kingdom (UK: England, Scotland and Wales) Equality and Human Rights Commission [argues](#) that under the Equality Act 2010, employers may be obligated to consider long-term menopausal symptoms to be a disability under the law, which would require additional actions by employers.

Widely Held and Deeply Felt: Using This Issue to Build Union Engagement

Menopause-related issues are not just women's issues, they're worker issues. Addressing these problems as a union will help to remove the stigma that many women face in the workplace, and demonstrate how our union advocates for all members – which is an excellent way to build union solidarity.

The issues for menopausal women reach across several parts of the membership: the women they impact directly, as well as those working on our Health & Safety, Women of Steel, and Civil & Human Rights Committees. This provides a perfect opportunity for our committees to work collaboratively and support each other's work.

Working collectively to support each other's issues builds a stronger union, and demonstrates to all members that their fight is our union's fight. Solidarity forever.

RESOURCES

The following resources can provide a starting point for locals looking to address members' menopause issues.

NOTE: Some of these resources are from the UK.

- [USW WOS](#)
- [USW Health, Safety & Environment](#)
- [USW Tony Mazzocchi Center](#)
- [USW Civil and Human Rights](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network](#)
- [Menopause at Work](#)
- [Supporting Working Women Through Menopause: Guidance for union representatives](#)
- [Dr. Jen Gunter, author of The Menopause Manifesto](#)

Tips for New Stewards

Congratulations on accepting the role of Local Union Steward! The work you will do for your members will have a positive impact on people's lives in a way you would have never imagined.

You might feel overwhelmed, so here are some tips and wisdom that will help you effectively represent your members and the union.

- 1. It's okay to ask for help.** If you're worried about making mistakes or uncomfortable confronting management, understand that you will gain confidence and knowledge over time. Don't hesitate to ask more experienced Stewards for help. No one expects you to be a super steward.
- 2. Do your best, but don't make promises.** Never promise anything other than you will do your best. Be careful of using phrases that promise conclusive actions, like "I'll take care of it."
- 3. Treat everyone equally.** Don't focus your time on your immediate co-workers and friends. We have a duty to provide equal representation to everyone.
- 4. Engage with new hires.** Greet every new worker and explain your role as the steward, and the work of the union.
- 5. Be firm, yet professional with management.** By law, when acting in your role as a steward, you are equal to management. Remain professional, but don't let management treat you poorly.
- 6. Know the difference between your union role with your employee role.** You are equal with management when doing union business only. All other times you are expected to

follow the rules and requirements that apply to everyone else.

- 7. Motivate your union siblings to get involved.** Effective stewards get their co-workers involved in the union's work. Think of yourself as an organizer who solves problems and builds new leaders in the process.
- 8. Have an organizational system.** Keep a calendar, a notepad, and a pen handy. Invest in a binder or document organizer to store files. Just throwing stuff in the trunk of your car or work locker is a recipe for disaster.
- 9. Do your research before answering questions.** If you don't know something, take the time to ask or research the issue. Don't make assumptions and give your members wrong answers. You will quickly lose credibility, and your members will no longer come to you for help.
- 10. Don't beat yourself up.** We all make mistakes; it's part of being human. If you make a mistake, deal with it as soon as possible before it gets worse.

If you follow these tips and work for the best interest of the union and your members, you will be an effective steward.

Remember, you are doing an important job for your co-workers, your family, and your community, and very few people have the guts, energy, and dedication to take on this role. Be proud of yourself for caring enough to accept this responsibility.