

# Menopause and the Effect on Veterinary Professionals and Teams

A Veterinary Woman Initiative as part of  
Women's Health Month 2020



Sponsored by the Society of Practising  
Veterinary Surgeons





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*Menopause is an important thing to take up space in a society, because half of us are going through this, but we're living like it's not happening.*

Michelle Obama

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Menopause has historically been a taboo subject. A physiological inevitability which womankind simply has to live through. However, the human body was never designed to go through menopause. Stone-age people rarely lived beyond 40 years and our ovaries have not adapted to our increasing longevity. The middle-aged hormonal collapse of menopause has wide ranging physical and psychological consequences, which are becoming more openly discussed across media, popular culture and various industries.

In the veterinary sector, the high proportion of women coupled with the recruitment and retention crisis in clinical practice indicates we should be doing all we can to support long, healthy careers. The significant impact menopause has for many individuals on both their life and work highlights this as one possible area where we could potentially be doing more. During her Presidential year at the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons, Anna Judson held frank and open discussions about the impact of menopause on her own life and the lives of peers and colleagues. During these discussions, it became apparent that there is a growing appetite for sharing experiences, increasing awareness and developing understanding and support in clinical practice and beyond.

This preliminary survey may be small scale, but the themes and findings closely mirror much larger studies across different sectors. Simple, practical measures emerge as making a real difference to the working lives of affected individuals. In particular, a non-judgemental culture of openness and understanding emerges as a key factor to improving the workplace for menopausal women. We all need to sit up and take heed in order to safeguard and improve the wellbeing of the individual, and the health of our practices and profession.

Signed

Anna Judson (SPVS President),  
Liz Barton (Editor, Veterinary Woman)

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## SECTION 1 Introduction:

The survey, conducted as part of Veterinary Woman Health Month October 2020, highlighted that the majority of women are negatively impacted and that more can be done to both raise awareness and provide support.

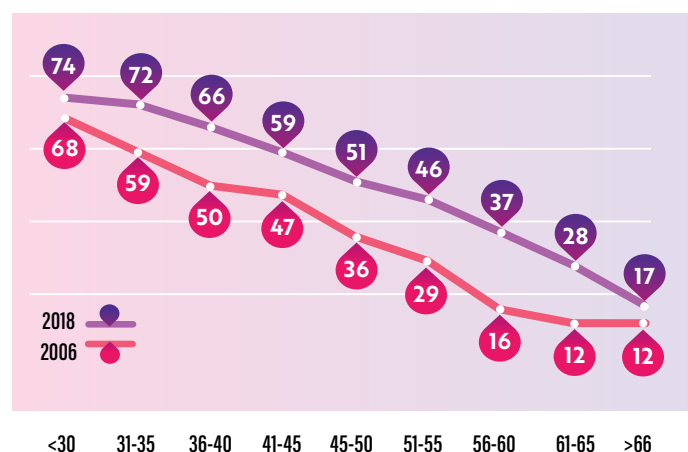
Menopause is a physiological inevitability for 100% of women, who currently make up 61% of the veterinary surgeon and 97% of the veterinary nursing workforce<sup>1</sup>. Veterinary Woman, in partnership with the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) conducted an online survey throughout October 2020, inviting responses from anyone working within the veterinary sector to determine both the awareness and impact of the menopause in working life.

### Why was the study conducted?

The attrition rate of women from the profession is a major concern in the veterinary workforce. At graduation, 75% of veterinary surgeons are female. At the age of 46-50 women make up just 50%, and in the over 65's it's down to 17%<sup>1</sup>.

While the overall percentage of women veterinary surgeons has increased, the trend in declining percentage representation with increasing age is similar when comparing data from 2006 and 2018<sup>1,2</sup>. This suggests we have failed to significantly improve retention of female talent over this period.

% of female UK practicing veterinary surgeons with age in years<sup>1,2</sup>



## Why menopause?

Menopause is the cessation of menstruation - a physical change to the body - and for many women this can cause physical and psychological symptoms. It tends to occur aged 45-55 and symptoms may last for 4-12 years. Previous studies from outside the veterinary sector have highlighted the huge impact of the menopause on working life<sup>3-5</sup>.

Menopause is estimated to cost the UK economy 14 million working days per year. Significant numbers of women consider leaving careers they enjoy due to the challenges of working while experiencing symptoms<sup>4,5</sup>.

A 2017 study by the Welsh TUC of over 4000 showed 85% of women workers who've experienced the menopause felt it has an effect on working life, while around 6 in 10 had witnessed the issue being treated as a joke in the workplace. This study found that the combined effect of the symptoms and worrying about how they would be viewed in the workplace often caused a loss of confidence and led women to feel isolated and alone. These feelings were greatly exacerbated in stressful and unsympathetic environments.<sup>3</sup>

The British Medical Association conducted a menopause survey of their members in 2020<sup>4</sup>. Of the 2000 respondents, 90% said that menopause symptoms had impacted their working lives with 38% saying that the impact was significant. Only 16% had discussed their menopause symptoms with their manager and 47% wanted to but did not feel comfortable doing so. The report highlights several key recommendations to better support doctors working through menopause.

## BMA recommendations to support doctors working through menopause:

1. **Breaking the taboo** – employers should take a pro-active approach to normalising the topic of menopause and spread awareness of the impact the symptoms can have on work.
2. **Access to flexible working** – enabling doctors to work flexibly will make their symptoms more manageable and improve morale. This should be made available across all specialities, and for those in, or applying for, senior roles.
3. **Adjustments to the workplace** – this could include improving room ventilation, easier access to toilet facilities, drinking water and rest breaks.
4. **Support for mental health and wellbeing**
5. **Developing an inclusive culture** – including actions to address sexist and ageist behaviours in the workplace that prevent women speaking about menopause and asking for support.

Many of these themes were similar to the findings in our study, and warrant further attention as potential recommendations to veterinary employers.

## How was the study conducted?

A survey created by VW and SPVS was publicised through social media, veterinary press and SPVS member channels throughout October 2020. Responses were encouraged from across the sector including all roles, ages and genders, to gauge awareness in addition to experiences of the menopause. The survey included both qualitative and quantitative responses.

## SECTION 2

# Presentation of the Data

90%

of respondents would like to know more about the impacts of the menopause; the majority wanting to know more both from a personal and business/HR perspective.

83%

said the menopause had impacted their health. Fatigue, irritability and difficulty sleeping were most commonly reported symptoms, affecting over three quarters of respondents.

Nearly  
50%

said the impact on their mental health had been moderate to severe.

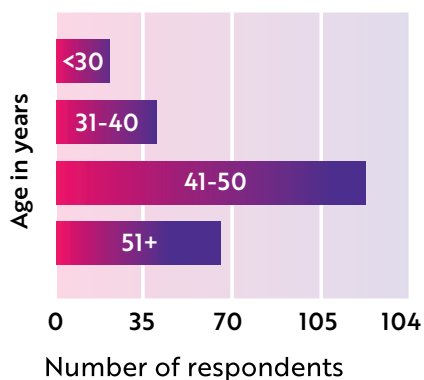
75%

of respondents were concerned about the impact on their health, life and work.

33%

of respondents said the menopause had a moderate to severe impact on their working life / career.

Number of Respondents by Age



## Summary of respondents

97.6% female

59% veterinary surgeons

33% veterinary nurses

7% practice managers

1% students

75% in clinical roles

32% in non-clinical roles (some overlapping roles)

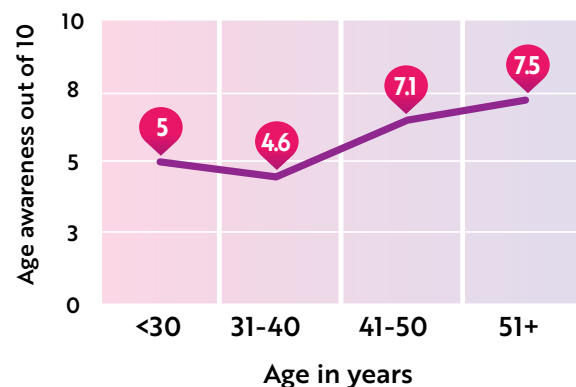
58% had leadership roles within their organisations

Total of  
**251**  
responses

## A. Awareness

Awareness of the impacts of the menopause were moderate and increased around peri/menopausal age. Across the ages there was a wide range of stated awareness, from 0 to 10. The average awareness across all age categories was 6.8 out of 10. Several comments were made about the desire for increased awareness, both personally and among colleagues.

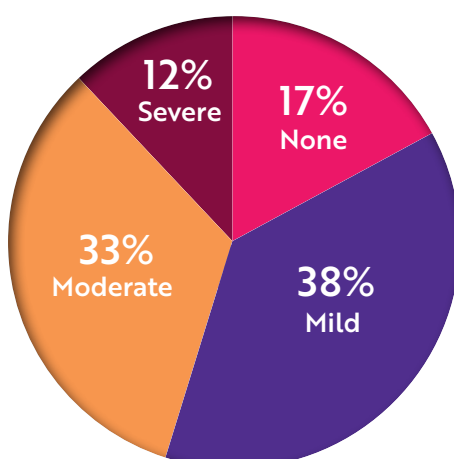
Average awareness of the impacts of menopause



## B. Impact on physical health

Menopause is a physiological event and therefore some impact on health is expected. For the majority, this impact is negligible or mild. However, for a significant percentage the impacts are moderate to severe. While irritability, difficulty sleeping and fatigue were the most commonly reported health symptoms experienced, headaches, poor concentration, joint pain, night sweats and hot flushes were also very common. For some individuals, the symptoms prevented them from continuing certain aspects of clinical work, including heavy lifting and farm work.

What impact has the menopause had on your health?



## 7. Have you experienced any of the following symptoms associated with menopause or peri-menopause?

		Response Percent	Response Total
1	Night sweats	63.73%	130
2	Hot flushes	58.82%	120
3	Fatigue	77.45%	158
4	Irritability	75.98%	155
5	Difficulty sleeping	77.45%	158
6	Poor concentration	64.22%	131
7	Pain or tenderness in your breasts	35.29%	72
8	Headaches	56.37%	115
9	Hair loss	18.63%	38
10	Irregular menstrual bleeding	45.10%	92
11	Palpitations	37.25%	76
12	Reduced muscle mass	13.73%	28
13	Joint stiffness, aches and pains	61.27%	125
14	Recurrent UTIs	7.35%	15
15	Reduced libido	51.96%	106
16	Vaginal dryness	33.33%	68
17	Other*	13.73%	28
*Other included dry eyes, bloating, cramps, dizziness, migraines, painful hands, loss of skin elasticity, weight gain, reduced exercise tolerance and nausea.		answered	204
		skipped	48

//

*I had to leave farm practice due to joint problems.*

*I developed severe pain in my fingers about 2 years ago, I struggled to continue working. I then started with recurrent urinary problems before the night sweats started.*

*I think this was the point that I realised the menopause was affecting me.*

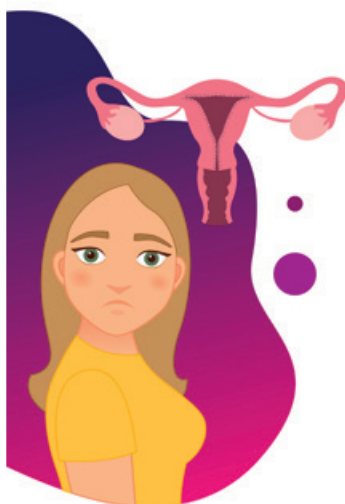
*The push to seek help was when I developed severe anxiety and insomnia.*

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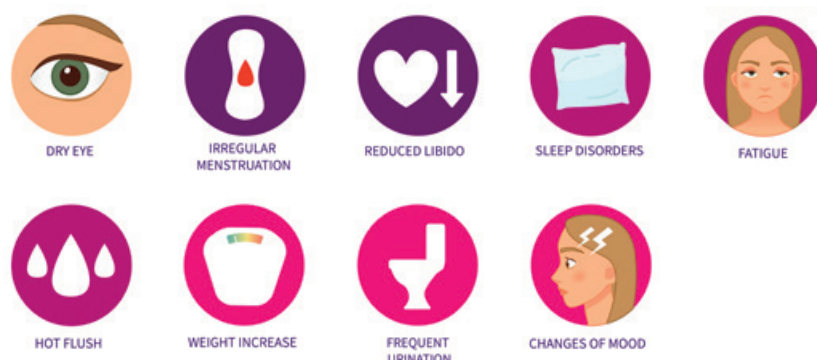
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*Months of daily symptoms including nausea, dizziness, fatigue. May settle for month or so, but then returns for 4-6 months again. Had to reduce work, initially number of days, then couldn't manage whole days. Periods when cannot drive car when symptoms bad as so dizzy or may just fall asleep at the wheel.*

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## Menopause Symptoms







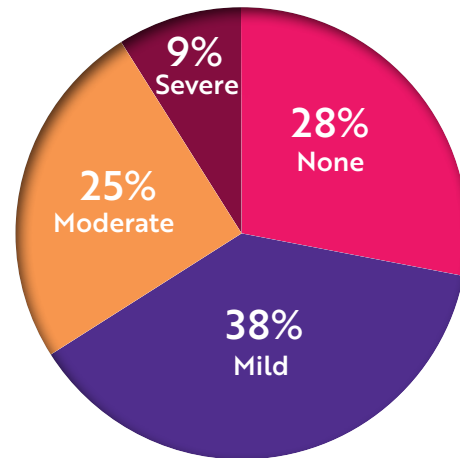




## E. Impact on working life/career:

As mentioned previously, some individuals had to cease certain aspects of clinical work due to the impact of the menopause. Others moved out of leadership roles, permanent positions and/or reduced their hours of work to cope with the symptoms. The need for breaks, adequate hydration and measures to help cope with hot flushes (e.g. a fan or air conditioning) was mentioned by several respondents as important workplace hygiene factors for sustainable working. Several respondents commented that their workplace was not supportive and symptoms were something they were expected to 'get on with'. Lack of understanding especially amongst younger colleagues was reported to be detrimental and contributing to feelings of anxiety and low mood. Conversely, supportive workplaces which showed understanding and facilitated flexible working were reported to make a positive impact on working life and mood.

What impact has the menopause had on your working life/career?



hormonal  
lack confidence  
flushes  
busy  
mood swings  
poor sleep  
periods  
issues  
health  
physical  
tiredness  
stressful  
concentrate  
cope  
fatigue  
symptoms  
tired  
forget  
Brain  
joint pain  
exhausted  
concentration  
work  
mood  
commitments  
career  
ability  
tearful  
life  
worry  
hot flush  
Sleep  
change  
sick  
brain fog  
struggle  
pressure  
lost  
dizzy  
stress  
mistakes  
irritable  
hard  
role  
difficult



## F. Workplace and personal measures:

When asked what measures individuals had put in place to reduce the impact of menopause on health and home life, respondents mentioned therapies (including hormone replacement therapy, anti-depressants, herbal supplements, joint supplements, essential oils, vitamins, cognitive behavioural therapy), exercise, yoga, meditation, diet changes, reduced alcohol/caffeine intake, positive mindset, good sleep hygiene, getting outdoors, socialising and hobbies. Many of the self-care aspects which respondents found helpful are also recommended for improving mental health, which, as we have seen, is frequently negatively impacted.

When asked what measures workplaces had put in place to reduce the impact of the menopause on working life and career, the most frequent response was 'none'. Positive measures put in place included being allowed flexibility, adjusted hours, breaks, provision of fans / air conditioning and natural fibres for clothing. Open discussion with managers and teams, and understanding with the ability to work flexibly was also mentioned as a valued form of support.



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*I don't talk to my colleagues about it as I find it hard to do so. If I am totally honest, I am also worried that they will see it as a weakness and therefore dismiss me or not take me so seriously in my role.*

*"Recently I've found yoga has helped with my hot flushes and sweats. I've also found being open with everyone at work has helped - luckily one of the receptionists also is going through the menopause at same time and she's been really supportive."*

*"I told everyone within my working group I was going through it and stressed it was a natural part of my life, I was making compensations for it personally and I expected my company to make them professionally. I have had full support from them."*

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*Education for all about what it entails so as and when it does happen, others will be more understanding."*

*Temperature control in all buildings.  
Clothing that helps with hot flashes.  
Decent break room where can get peace  
and quiet if have headache."*

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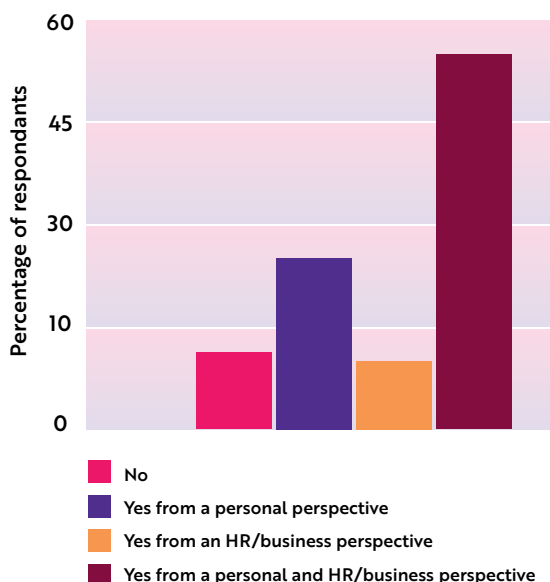


## G. Addressing concerns and improving understanding:

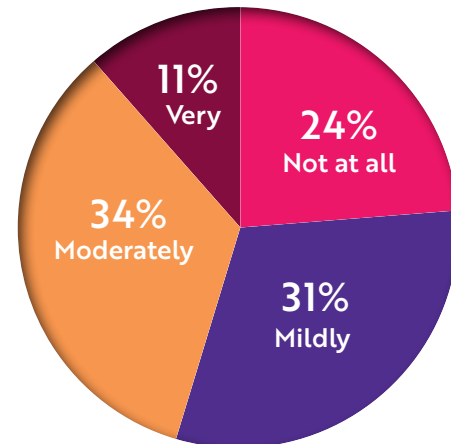
- Over three quarters of respondents said they were concerned about the impacts of menopause on their health, life and work.
- A majority said they wanted to know more about impact of menopause, both from a personal and a business/HR perspective, with only 11% not wanting to know more.
- Considering moderate to high levels of awareness among the respondents (section A), this shows a gap in knowledge between awareness and understanding of the specific impacts of menopause.

The demographic with greatest representation among respondents were women of peri-/menopausal age, thus the levels of concern and desire to know more may be skewed by this engaged group. However, if this is the case the desire to know more suggest there is a knowledge gap and a lack of access to information to address concerns. For a subject which is taboo, limited discussion and a sense of 'getting on with it' tends towards reduced understanding of how the impacts can be mitigated, and a belief it is culturally appropriate to suffer in silence.

### Would you like to know more about the specific impact of the menopause?



### How concerned are you about the impact of the menopause on your health, life and work? ?



*"I was with a group of non-vet friends recently, and one of their organisations had introduced 'Menopause training' for their management staff. The ladies were all outraged that menopausal women should be labelled as a 'problem to be managed', but I thought it was a great idea. More awareness, more understanding, less judgementalism.*

*"I have continued to take the pill to avoid symptoms of menopause as I am worried about what the impact will mean for my career and business.*

*The degree of uncertainty over how any individual may be affected is worrying.*





## SECTION 3

# Conclusions

While this study was small scale and the majority of respondents were women of peri-/menopausal age, the correlation to data obtained in larger studies across different sectors indicates these findings are a fair representation of the majority. Taking this into consideration, the majority responded that they wanted to know more about the impact of menopause, both from a personal and business/HR perspective. This information void may well be driven by the cultural taboo surrounding menopause. While there are many resources available online, without curation it can be difficult to know which are the best to access. Knowledge of menopause among local health professionals is variable and some women describe resistance to the prescribing of HRT and related therapies.

When looking to raise awareness and understanding of the negative impacts of the menopause, we must be mindful of the potential to increase negative bias (whether conscious or unconscious) against women of menopausal age. Highlighting the impact on cognitive factors such as concentration and memory, or physical factors such as joint pain and fatigue, may lead to bias against the demographic of women of menopausal age in both clinical and non-clinical roles. We must ensure that breaking a taboo and bringing these issues into the spotlight, we are actively working against the propagation of bias and towards the provision of positive support mechanisms. Indeed, respondents who had not experienced any negative impacts described the liberation and new lease of life post-menopause, with more time and personal resource to devote to life, work and relationships.



Revisiting the recommendation made in the BMA report<sup>4</sup>, these are themes we should be exploring more within the veterinary profession, with a few adjustments in italics below:

1. **Breaking the taboo** – *the profession as a whole* should take a pro-active approach to normalising the topic of menopause and spread awareness of the impact the symptoms can have on work.
2. **Access to flexible working** – enabling flexible working to make symptoms more manageable and improve morale. This should be made available across all specialities, and for those in, or applying for, senior roles.
3. **Adjustments to the workplace** – this could include improving room ventilation, easier access to toilet facilities, drinking water and rest breaks. *Help with heavy lifting and adjustment of physical workload to help with joint pain, dizziness etc.*
4. **Support for mental health and wellbeing, and physical health** – *to recognise and support the need for specialist support and advice.*
5. **Developing an inclusive culture** – including actions to address sexist and ageist behaviours in the workplace that prevent women speaking about menopause and asking for support. *Improving understanding of the impacts while fostering a no-blame culture.*

## SECTION 4

# References

Veterinary Woman is creating a free access menopause information hub and support network on the website [www.veterinarywoman.co.uk](http://www.veterinarywoman.co.uk). This already includes curated links to content and a variety of resources to help individuals, managers and employers to understand the menopause and mechanisms to support those affected by it. It will be regularly updated with curated content from within and outside the profession. Individuals and companies wishing to support this work, contribute to, or help to disseminate these resources please contact [info@veterinarywoman.co.uk](mailto:info@veterinarywoman.co.uk)

### References:

1. RCVS Annual Report 2006
2. RCVS Facts 2018
3. 'The Menopause: a workplace issue'. Wales TUC The Menopause: a workplace issue - Wales TUC | TUC
4. Challenging the culture on menopause for working doctors report ([bma.org.uk](http://bma.org.uk))
5. <https://www.itv.com/news/2016-11-23/quarter-of-women-going-through-menopause-considered-leaving-work>



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