

Endometriosis in the workplace

A resource for employers



endometriosis uk

providing support increasing understanding

Introduction

Have you heard of endometriosis? Chances are that you haven't, yet 2 million women in the UK are affected by the condition. This means that some of your employees are likely to be affected. This leaflet aims to give you the facts about the condition and suggests ways in which you can help to reduce the impact on your business, and improve productivity, as well as improve the quality of life in the workplace for women with endometriosis.

What Is endometriosis?

Endometriosis (pronounced en-doh-mee-tree-oh-sis) occurs when tissue similar to the lining of the womb grows in other areas of the body. This tissue remains within the body where it bleeds and forms lesions, cysts and adhesions resulting in inflammation, pain and other medical problems. The cause of endometriosis is unknown. Endometriosis can be treated with drug therapy and surgery but, as yet, there is no cure.

For most women, endometriosis does not affect their day-to-day activities. For others, it can cause severe pain and other symptoms that affect a woman's quality of life. Women may experience problems with work, personal relationships, sleeping and fertility. In rare cases, endometriosis has been considered a disability, as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995).

As the symptoms are varied and common to many other conditions,

diagnosis is difficult. In addition, awareness of the condition is low. These factors mean that it can take a woman on average 8 years from first seeing her GP about her symptoms (commonly extreme and prolonged period pains) to receiving a firm diagnosis. Consequently, many women with endometriosis do not yet have a diagnosis to discuss with their employer.

Endometriosis is not a visible condition, despite its potentially severe effects, and its close association with the menstrual cycle makes it difficult to talk about, particularly in the workplace.

What are the effects of endometriosis?

For some women, pain can occur during periods, at ovulation, during and after intercourse and even with bowel movement. Sleeping patterns and energy levels may be adversely affected and taking painkillers can actually make this worse. Treatment can be effective for some women with endometriosis and may reduce, but is unlikely to eliminate, these symptoms.

Relationships, both personal and professional, can be affected. This can engender low self-esteem, frustration and isolation. Endometriosis can make it hard to conceive naturally and this places extra strain on relationships.

The combination of physical symptoms and the resulting pressures on a woman's everyday life can, if not properly managed, have an adverse effect on her job performance.

What employers should be aware of

Maximising productivity and minimising unplanned absence are priorities for any employer. The welfare of your staff is also a concern.

Providing an understanding and supportive environment for women with endometriosis can help to reduce the psychological symptoms outlined above. Open discussion between you and the employee about the impact, if any, on her working patterns enables both parties' expectations to be managed. This helps you to minimise the impact of sickness absence, reduce staff turnover, maintain team morale and demonstrate your commitment to the health and well-being of your employees. Where you are able to make alternative working arrangements for a woman with endometriosis, don't forget, when communicating these to her colleagues, you'll need to be sensitive to avoid anyone becoming embarrassed.

As an employer you may need to make the first move – a recently published survey of 3,500 UK women with endometriosis showed that 43% of respondents were afraid to tell their employers in case it affected their job prospects.

What employers can do

Consider proactive work adjustments for employees with endometriosis:

If your business can accommodate it, you may be able to **permit flexible hours or home working**. Even women with

severe endometriosis have times when they are less troubled by symptoms and flexible working can be used to maintain long-term productive employment. It can enable women to make up time lost, build up 'credit' in case of future need and to reduce any anxiety they may feel at not being able to work at their full potential. If a woman has needed repeated sickness absences, you may consider mutually agreeing a switch to part time flexible working with paid overtime for any excess hours she is able to work. No good employee wants a bad sickness record and as an employer you will minimise your sickness costs. In addition, you can expect your flexibility to be repaid by greater staff loyalty.

With the exception of planned surgery, absences from work due to endometriosis are likely to be for no more than a few days at a time. If such a pattern of absence is damaging to your business you may be able to **consider an alternative role which is mutually acceptable**. Most women with endometriosis would rather keep their employment than be dismissed on grounds of ill health.

Raise awareness of endometriosis by distributing our leaflets and posters. If you are a large employer and display health awareness posters, you may consider having an 'endometriosis awareness' display. We can provide free materials for this purpose.

If you are a large employer, you could **work with your occupational health department** to encourage managers and teams to share best practice.

Diet is important in the management of endometriosis. If you provide catering for your staff, ask if anyone has any special dietary requirements and try to cater for them.

At Endometriosis UK, we employ women with the condition — if you would like to speak to us for practical advice, whatever the size of your organisation, please contact our Chief Executive.

Let us help you

As the largest UK charity dedicated to endometriosis, we provide support for all those affected by endometriosis, including employers, and raise awareness of the condition and its effects.

We have a network of local groups throughout the UK, which your employees can access. These groups help alleviate the isolation that living with endometriosis can cause.

We provide a helpline that is open 365 days a year. Our trained volunteers

provide information, support and a listening ear. Call us on **0808 808 2227**.

We provide information about endometriosis including factsheets and publications, enabling women to make informed choices about their treatment and help them manage the condition and its effects.

Our website provides access to this information, our support networks, and the latest campaign news: www.endometriosis-uk.org

Conclusion

It has been estimated that endometriosis costs UK business £2.8 billion per annum in lost working time. Endometriosis UK wants to work with employers to help reduce that cost. Please use us — together we can make a positive difference.



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*Registered charity number: 1035810
Formerly The National Endometriosis Society*