

# Women's Health Guide

Women make up nearly half the UK workforce, yet their concerns about health and safety issues, both inside and outside the workplace, are not properly addressed. The CWU supports the TUC's view that, when creating legislation or issuing guidelines, measures should be gender sensitive, taking into account the physiological and social differences between women and men that have implications for health and safety.

This guide can be used as a first step to ensure that employers consider women staff when developing health and safety initiatives such as carrying out risk assessments, planning new systems of work, work equipment or personal protective equipment. It can also be used to start raising awareness of women's health and safety concerns among members.

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## Working can be bad for your health

Many work-associated activities can affect your health. In this section we highlight some of the most common problems and suggest how you can minimise the risks.

### Hazardous substances

In a recent survey, one in five women said they were exposed to fumes, dust and other harmful substances at work. Harmful chemicals, including solvents, may affect fertility and pregnancy, and can lead to miscarriages or premature births, as well as increasing the risk of other diseases such as cancer. If you are worried about substances in your working environment, contact your safety rep.

### Back pain

At least 100,000 women a year suffer with back problems because of work.



### Lifting and moving

More than a quarter of women are lifting or moving heavy loads at work. Under the Manual Handling Regulations 1992, any manual handling tasks you may be expected to do should have been assessed.

Following the suggestions below will help to prevent injuries and back pain:

Check the weight of the object, and whether the weight is evenly distributed.

Ensure the route you will take is clear.

Have a firm grip, using gloves if necessary.

Get help if needed, either another person or mechanical equipment

Lift with your leg muscles

Keep the load close to your body

Move your feet rather than twisting your spine

Try to avoid lifting above your head or below your knees

### **Other causes**

Back pain can also be caused by long drives without breaks, sitting in low, soft chairs, spending long periods in one position.

### **Coping with back pain**

Your first reaction may be to take to your bed; in fact, bed rest is bad for backs. Keep as active as possible; swimming, particularly backstroke and front crawl, is an especially good form of exercise for back pain. Walking, cycling (not on racing/drop handle bar bikes), yoga, T'ai Chi and Alexander Technique are also beneficial. Speak to your doctor before beginning an exercise programme, or use qualified instructors who are aware of your problem. Speak to a pharmacist or doctor before taking medication. You may also consider consulting a chiropractor, osteopath or physiotherapist.

### **Your workstation**

Twice as many females as males suffer from work-related headaches and eye strain. More than half of these workers attributed the cause to the use of display screen equipment.

Regulations require that all workstations have risk assessments.

Help prevent stiffness, aching and more serious conditions such as repetitive strain injury (RSI) by following these basic tips:

Change position frequently and stretch regularly

Get up and walk around as often as possible

If your feet don't rest flat on the floor, this can cause pressure on the backs of your thighs or knees, compressing nerves and blood vessels. Try a footrest

If your chair is uncomfortable, ask for a replacement

Ideally, when typing your wrists should be loose and flexible above the keyboard.

If you find this uncomfortable, wrist rests may be helpful.

General Osteopathic Council: 020 7357 6655 [www.osteopathy.org.uk](http://www.osteopathy.org.uk)

**Eye strain** is a common problem in people doing prolonged, visual work. Poor lighting, blurred screen images and reflections can make this worse. Eyes become drier and are more susceptible to conditions such as conjunctivitis. As your eyes become tired, you will find that you screw up facial muscles, which can cause headaches.

To keep your eyes bright and shiny, look away and re-focus for one-two minutes in every 20. Blink regularly to prevent eyes becoming dry. Have your eyes tested every two years. Don't sit too close to the screen; ideally, you should be 26 inches away. Under the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992, if you need to wear spectacles for looking at a display screen, your employer must pay for regular eye and eyesight tests and contribute towards the cost of spectacles. You should have your eyes tested every two years.

### **Laptops**

Because laptop screens and keyboards are smaller and are designed to use outside the office environment, it can be harder to maintain comfortable and

healthy working postures. Follow the guidelines for standard workstations, but take note of the following as well:

Avoid slouching or sitting hunched forward

Push the laptop back slightly so that your arms rest on the table and wrists are relaxed into your lower back, and use a pillow or similar for support if necessary  
Adjust the screen brightness to suit the environment.

### **Repetitive strain injury (RSI)**

RSI covers a number of injuries affecting the muscles, tendons and nerves primarily of the neck and upper limbs. There are two types of RSI: Specific Named Conditions including carpal tunnel syndrome and tennis elbow; and Diffuse RSI or non-specific pain syndrome. This is where there is no clear-cut diagnosis but a range of symptoms exist. Symptoms include aches, pain, swelling, numbness, tingling, weakness and cramps. With diffuse RSI there may be no obvious symptoms. People who work with display screen equipment may develop RSI, but other activities - such as text messaging - can also lead to the condition. RSI is caused by a combination of overuse and repetition, awkward or static posture and insufficient recovery time, and stress is often a factor. It is preventable and treatable, especially if early warning signs are heeded. If you develop any of the symptoms of RSI take action on prevention. If symptoms persist seek treatment.

### **Prevention**

Follow the guidelines above on workstations and laptops

Cut down on repetitive tasks where possible

Maintain good posture and fitness

Try to keep stress levels down

Try to avoid relying on your mouse; use keyboard shortcuts instead

If you think your workload may be contributing to RSI, talk to your manager or your safety rep

If you have been diagnosed with RSI, treatment can include physiotherapy, the use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, chiropractic and osteopathy.

Complementary therapies such as Alexander Technique and Yoga can also be effective.

Repetitive Strain Injury Association (RSIA): 0800 018 5012

**[www.rsi.websitehosting-services.co.uk](http://www.rsi.websitehosting-services.co.uk)**

### **Your Safety Rep**

Safety reps have a legal right to consult with management over safety issues. They represent members, inspect workplaces and investigate problems. They also have the right to all relevant information from the management, including any risk assessments that have been carried out on women workers. By using these rights, safety reps can help to make women's working environments safer and healthier.

Safety reps can work towards improving women's health and safety at work by: raising the health and safety problems women face at work with employers; encouraging women to attend training courses and to become reps; and mounting health and safety campaigns aimed at women.

### **Be honest about your health**

Women who are busy both with demanding jobs and family care often neglect their own health. They may rush a child to the doctor but will struggle on without medical help themselves. Sometimes this can result in serious problems developing which could have been prevented by early treatment.

Women may also fear an unsympathetic or indiscreet reaction from line managers and employers. You have a right to complete confidentiality. Remember you are entitled to time off because of illness. If you are concerned about your absence record, or if you have an underlying health problem, talk to your safety rep.

Many conditions are now covered by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), including asthma, diabetes and, in some cases, cancer. This means you have some protection against dismissal because of your health problems.



Women who experience ill health during pregnancy have full protection for all pregnancy-related absences. It is important you report to your manager if your absences are pregnancy related and, if you require a longer period of sick leave, ensure your doctor makes the cause of absence clear on the sick certificate. None of these absences should be counted towards attendance procedures. If you have any concerns, speak to your safety rep.

Women tend to use sick leave to cope with family emergencies. It is very important to ask for special leave - which you are entitled to - rather than using sick leave.

### **Respect yourself**

In order to stay healthy, you need to respect your body in a number of ways.

#### **Diet**

A healthy diet does not mean an end to indulgences. It just means choosing a variety of foods every day from the four main food groups:

#### **Breads and cereals**

#### **Fruits and vegetables**

Dairy foods

Meat and fish **or alternatives such as beans or lentils.**

Try to cut down on fats, added sugar and artificial additives

The sections that follow suggest healthy diets to deal with particular problems, eg premenstrual syndrome and osteoporosis.



#### **Keeping fit**

A small amount of exercise will make a difference to your health. Simply be active for 30 minutes a day, three times a week; brisk walking is a good choice. Those 30 minutes do not have to be continuous - you can do them in two sessions of 15 minutes to receive all the health benefits.

#### **Smoking**

The dangers of smoking are well-known today, but that doesn't make it any easier to give up. People smoke for many reasons and your habit may be the result of an underlying problem such as depression and anxiety. If you are pregnant, or trying for a baby, it is especially important you try to stop. Smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of miscarriage, haemorrhaging and cot death, and your baby is likely to be born lighter (and therefore likely to have various problems) and even suffering from nicotine withdrawal symptoms. Passive smoking can also be bad for you and your baby.

There are now many sources of support to help you stop. The NHS Smoking Helpline on 0800 169 0 169 can give you practical advice on how to begin the process.

NHS Pregnancy Smoking Helpline: 0800 169 9 169

**[www.givingupsmoking.co.uk](http://www.givingupsmoking.co.uk)**

### **Alcohol**

Drink affects women differently from men. Because women develop higher blood alcohol levels, the toxic effects have more impact on their internal organs, including the liver, heart and brain. Women are also more vulnerable to developing alcohol-related diseases; research shows the minimum amount of alcohol necessary to produce cirrhosis in a woman's liver is two to three times less than in a man. This doesn't mean you shouldn't enjoy a drink! Just follow these guidelines: Women can drink up to two or three units a day without significant risk to their health. A unit is half a pint of standard strength beer, a small glass of wine or a pub measure of spirit

Spread your drinking and avoid binge drinking

If you have drunk too much, avoid alcohol for at least 48 hours afterwards to give your body time to recover.

If you're pregnant, or trying to become pregnant, you should drink no more than one or two units of alcohol, once or twice a week. Because alcohol can reduce the ability to conceive, and excessive drinking can lead to early miscarriage. Women who are breastfeeding should avoid drinking alcohol just before a feed. This is because the alcohol can pass to the baby in through breast milk.

Alcoholics Anonymous: look in your local phone directory, or call 01904 644026

**[www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)**

### **Drugs**

It's not only illegal drugs - such as cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin - that can adversely affect your body. Prescription drugs, including tranquilisers (with brand names such as Valium and Ativan), can cause problems, too. And recently, the problem of addiction to over-the-counter painkillers has been highlighted.

Working while under the influence of drugs - even those your doctor has prescribed - can be dangerous, to yourself and others.

If you are concerned about your own, or somebody else's, drug use, contact the National Drug Helpline, in confidence, on 0800 77 66 00.

### **Reproduction issues**

Women have to deal with particular health issues related to reproduction, from premenstrual syndrome to osteoporosis. This section looks at problems you may experience and how to deal with them.

#### **Premenstrual syndrome (PMS)**

PMS can be debilitating. Common symptoms are feeling irritable, tired, and bloated before your period, while some women experience extreme emotions such as depression and aggression. Although the causes of PMS are not known, it is thought to be a response to changes in the menstrual cycle, when hormone levels are constantly altering.

There are many ways to alleviate symptoms:

Tiredness and irritability can partly be caused by fluid retention. Drink fewer and smaller cups of tea, cut down on salt. Eat more cucumber, prunes, bananas and oranges, and try herbal teas such as rosemary or raspberry leaf. Vitamin B deficiency may also be a cause. Eat B-rich foods such as yeast extract (Marmite), wholemeal bread and brown rice.

You may experience headaches and depression, too, because of changes in the levels of progesterone and oestrogen. Evening primrose oil - available from chemists - may help, and some women take the contraceptive pill. If you are considering the latter, talk to your doctor and be aware of the potential side effects.

Increased appetite and lethargy may be due to low blood sugar or tiredness.

Eating sweet things will make it worse. Try to have a more healthy diet, including

plenty of fruit and vegetables, fish, chicken and fibre (wholemeal bread and pasta and potatoes). Cut down on red meats, fats, sugar, refined and processed foods.

### **Tension**

Try relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises and yoga. Swimming and dance classes, as well as being enjoyable, can also help you relax.



### **Period pain**

When the womb contracts to expel its lining - menstrual blood - it needs calcium and oxygen. Calcium is found naturally in foods such as milk, tuna and cheese.

Oxygen intake increases with exercise, so is a good way of relieving cramps.

Running, swimming, deep breathing should all help (so when your daughter asks for a note excusing her from PE, don't give her one!). Strengthening tummy muscles by doing sit-up exercises will also ease discomfort.

### **Endometriosis**

This is a condition in which the cells that normally line the womb are present in spots and clusters elsewhere in the body. They are commonly found on the ovaries, fallopian tubes and on the peritoneum (the lining that covers the tubes, womb and supporting ligaments). Endometriosis can also appear as cysts, known as 'chocolate cysts'. In rare circumstances it is found in other parts of the body such as the lungs and kidneys. Endometriosis is benign (harmless) and does not lead to cancer of the womb or ovaries.

Towards the end of the menstrual cycle, if a pregnancy has not occurred, the levels of oestrogen and progesterone hormones drop and the thickened endometrium is then released, resulting in a period. Spots of endometriosis elsewhere in the body also respond to these hormones by releasing chemicals, which cause local inflammation leading to pain. Sometimes the body will try to protect itself and cover the inflamed area with scar tissue. Unfortunately, this scarring can also occur on the fallopian tubes and ovaries, causing infertility.

There may be no symptoms at all but the most common are:

Painful and/or heavy periods

Painful sexual intercourse

Painful ovulation

Infertility

Pelvic pain

Blood from the back passage

Coughing up blood (this is rare and caused by endometriosis in the lungs)

Other symptoms include tiredness and low energy levels, insomnia, mood swings and depression, premenstrual tension and back pain.

If you have any of these symptoms, you should consult your doctor straight away.

Ask to be referred to a gynaecologist with expert knowledge of endometriosis.

### **Polycystic ovaries (PCO)**

The term PCO covers a range of conditions, from a few benign cysts on the ovaries, to the extreme of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS, also known as Stein-Leventhal Syndrome). Symptoms vary dramatically from woman to woman, with some having none at all, going undiagnosed for many years. During the menstrual cycle the egg develops in a follicle (cyst) inside the ovary. At ovulation, the follicle bursts and releases the mature egg. In many women with PCO the egg doesn't mature fully and the follicle does not rupture. Follicles accumulate over time to cause multiple tiny cysts which can fill the ovaries.

**Symptoms include:**

Irregular or absent periods which, when they do appear, may be long and/or heavy  
Bleeding between periods  
Difficulty in conceiving  
Unwanted hair in places such as the face, chest, abdomen, back, arms and legs  
Acne, either on the face or back  
Obesity, although it is not known if this is a symptom or a cause  
Pelvic discomfort

If your symptoms are very mild, you may not realise that something is wrong until you have difficulty in conceiving. PCO is usually diagnosed from the results of blood tests and an ultrasound scan. Because this condition is so poorly understood, your doctor may not diagnose PCO. If you feel this to be the case, ask to be referred to a gynaecologist.

There is no cure for PCO at present, but symptoms can often be controlled: The contraceptive pill can relieve a number of symptoms, including acne and unwanted hair.

If you have reservations about taking the pill trying bleaching or waxing unwanted hair, or losing weight if necessary.

Antiandrogen drugs may remove unwanted hair

Insulin-sensitising drugs may alleviate symptoms such as acne and help regulate periods

The removal of both ovaries usually ends all symptoms. This is normally carried out only if the woman does not want to have any more children. However, it may be possible to have your eggs removed and frozen for use in the future. If you know you have PCO and you are having difficulty conceiving, there are several treatments to consider and you should see an infertility specialist to discuss which is best for you.

Some women with PCO do not respond to the insulin produced by their own body, which can lead to diabetes in later life. If you have the condition you should have your blood sugar checked every two years or so by your doctor.

### **Polycystic ovaries (PCO) and infertility**

Verity, The Polycystic Ovary Self-help Group 30 Charlton House, Charlton Street, London NW1 1HH. Send an SAE for more information.

### **Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome Association**

US-based organisation. Website provides information and message boards

[www.pcosupport.org](http://www.pcosupport.org)

### **Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)**

TSS is a rare but potentially serious disease that has been associated to tampon use. In rare cases it can be fatal. TSS is believed to be caused by toxin-producing strains of the staphylococcus aureus bacterium, found most commonly on the skin, in the nose, armpit, groin or vagina. In a small number of people certain strains of the bacterium produce toxins that cause TSS. Most people have antibodies in their bloodstream to protect them from the toxin, but many do not. TSS can affect anyone - men, women or children. Some cases are caused by infections following insect bites, burns or surgery. About half of reported cases are associated with women using tampons.

The link between TSS and tampon use is not clearly understood. However, research shows the risk of tampon-related TSS is associated with absorbency - the higher the absorbency the higher the risk.

Early symptoms are similar to flu: headache, sore throat, aching muscles and high temperature. Later symptoms include vomiting, diarrhoea, a rapid drop in blood pressure, dizziness, faintness, sunburn-like rash (especially on hands and feet), disorientation and possible organ damage.

## **Prevention**

Eliminate the risk by not using tampons

Avoid using high-absorbency tampons; use the lowest absorbency you can

Change tampons every few hours

Alternate sanitary towels and tampons

Never use tampons overnight - switch to sanitary towels

Keep tampons clean and dry

Avoid using tampons that contain rayon

Be sure to remove the last tampon at the end of each period

Do not use tampons if you have thrush, if you have had vaginosis within the last year or if you have any infected cuts or sores on your hands.

If symptoms appear remove the tampon and seek immediate medical attention.

Don't worry that you may be wasting doctors' time - it is essential to get medical help quickly for TSS. With early diagnosis, TSS can generally be effectively treated with antibiotics and other medicines to counteract the symptoms. If you have daughters who menstruate, make sure that they know the risks, too.

## **Women's Environmental Network**

Campaigns on environmental and health issues, including TSS 020 7481 9004

[www.wen.org.uk](http://www.wen.org.uk)

## **Pregnancy**

The best way to ensure you have a safe and healthy pregnancy is to attend all appointments with your midwife, doctor and hospital. This will ensure your baby's progress is closely monitored and the risk of potentially serious conditions such as pre-eclampsia developing are spotted.

You have a legal right to time off work to attend these appointments, as well as antenatal classes, which may be organised by your local health trust or by organisations such as the National Childbirth Trust (NCT). If you are having difficulty getting time off, or you are concerned your working conditions may be affecting you during pregnancy, speak to your manager or safety rep.

Association for Post-Natal Illness: 020 7386 0868 [www.apni.org](http://www.apni.org) CHILD - National Infertility Support Network Provides information and support to people experiencing infertility, as well as promoting awareness 01424 732361

[www.child.org.uk](http://www.child.org.uk) National Childbirth Trust 08709 908040  
nctpregnancyandbaby care.com

## **Menopause**

The menopause is when menstruation finally stops - commonly assumed to be around 50, but often much earlier. The reduction in hormone levels, which occurs at this time, can create problems for some women. Not all women experience problems but, for those who do, some of the symptoms include:

Hot flushes and night sweats

Dryness of the vagina

Osteoporosis or brittle bones

A healthy diet and plenty of exercise are very important during the menopause. Hot flushes are caused by hormonal changes in the body; not much can be done to prevent them other than trying to keep cool. Remember they are not as noticeable to others as they are to you and are certainly nothing to be embarrassed about. Vaginal dryness can be tackled with lubricating jelly (eg KY Jelly) available from chemists, or by asking your doctor for a lubricating cream.

Don't be embarrassed about going to your doctor.



### **Hormone replacement therapy**

You are entitled to ask your doctor about HRT. This is administered by pill, injection, skin patch or vaginal cream and may help reduce or prevent loss of bone density (which can lead to osteoporosis), hot flushes, perspiration, vaginal dryness, moodiness and insomnia. Some women may also be prescribed HRT for protection against osteoporosis and heart disease.

Many women have no side effects but HRT may cause:

Breast tenderness and fluid retention

Increase in gallbladder disease

High blood pressure

Monthly withdrawal bleeding

Before recommending HRT your doctor will give you a health check and you will need regular checks while using it. Some women need HRT for several months, others require longer treatment.

Extensive research has been done on links between HRT and a higher risk of breast cancer. There is no conclusive evidence. It is vital you discuss this with your doctor and you take the lowest dose that relieves your symptoms.

Women's Aid: 08457 023 468 [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

### **Health checks**

It can be difficult to spare the time for screening when you are busy at work but the CWU is committed to seeking agreements that result in time off work for women to attend cancer screening clinics.

### **Breast cancer**

Breast cancer affects one in nine women in England and Wales at some time, resulting in 13,000 deaths each year. Most cases - 80% - occur in post-menopausal women (Office for National Statistics, 1999). If it is caught early, it is easier to treat. It is therefore vital that you understand how to examine your breasts. (You can also ask your doctor to show you how to do this.) When? Once a month, preferably straight after your period. How? Start by lying flat on your bed, with your left hand behind your head, using your right hand to examine your left breast. Begin at the nipple using the flat part of your fingers - not the tips - and make small circular movements around your breast spiralling outwards. Then bring your arm down and use the same small circular movements to feel up to your armpit, then up to your collarbone and to the middle of your chest. Repeat on your right breast. Then stand up and look at your breasts in the mirror. Get to know how they feel and look.

#### **What am I looking for?**

Changes in size and shape

Unusual dimpling or puckering in either breast

Veins standing out n Changes in skin texture or skin rash

Unusual lumps or swelling

If you find any of these, don't panic! Most lumps are harmless, particularly in young women. But you must see your doctor immediately. Most successfully treated cancers have been detected by women who have examined their own breasts.

When you turn 50 you will probably be asked to have a mammography. This is a form of screening done by x-ray, normally used only on women over 50, as the monthly changes in breast tissue make it difficult to detect changes and lumps in the breast by this method in younger women. Mammography is uncomfortable but not normally painful, and it is a very effective way of detecting small lumps at a stage when they are more easily treatable. If you have any family history of breast cancer, it is important regular screening is carried out as well as self-

examination.

### **NHS Direct**

Advice on all aspects of healthcare, including cancer screening, healthy eating and sexually transmitted infections 0845 4647 (24 hours)

[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

### **Cervical cancer**

Cervical cancer kills between 1,100 and 3,000 women each year in England and Wales. But it is preventable; according to the Imperial Cancer Research fund, the UK's cancer screening programme is steadily reducing this number. Early treatment can ensure women are still able to have children.

Most doctors' surgeries and health practices now provide a women's health screening service. Usually you will be sent a letter inviting you to attend for cervical screening but, if not, you should ask your doctor.

The screening, which should be done at least every three years, involves a smear being taken from the cervix - the opening to the womb at the top of the vagina. This smear is analysed, and you should be notified of the result of the test by your doctor and told if any follow-up smears or treatment are necessary.

### **Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**

STIs are contracted through having sex. STIs don't just 'go away'; they must be treated, often quite easily. Some do not have any signs or symptoms, and so may go undetected, but can affect future fertility. Commonly known STIs are genital warts, HIV, syphilis, genital herpes, chlamydia and non-specific urethritis (NSU). Condoms offer good protection, although this is not 100%. The greater the number of sexual partners, the greater the risk.

Recognisable symptoms include:

Unusual vaginal discharge

Genital rashes, itchiness, sores, blisters, bumps and pain

Burning sensation when urinating or having sex

Frequent urination

If you think you have an STI, you can get free and confidential help from a sexual health service (eg genitourinary medicine clinic), family planning clinic or your doctor.

### **Chlamydia**

Chlamydia is a common, treatable, sexually transmitted infection, affecting 2-10% of the population. Untreated it can cause serious problems, including Pelvic Inflammatory Disease which can lead to an increased risk of ectopic pregnancy and even infertility. The infection is most common in younger men and women and the more sexual partners you have had, the greater the risk. To test for infection, a swab is taken from the cervix by a doctor or nurse. It is then easily treated with antibiotics.

Chlamydia often has no symptoms. Warning signs include pain low down in the abdomen, painful sexual intercourse, vaginal bleeding after intercourse, flu-like symptoms including a slight fever and nausea, mild vaginal discharge and painful and more frequent urination.



### **Osteoporosis**

Osteoporosis is a loss of bone mass associated with older age and is more likely to develop in women after the menopause; one in three women in the UK will develop osteoporosis after the age of 50. Affected bones have large holes and a thinner outer wall and are more easily broken. If not prevented or if left untreated, osteoporosis can progress painlessly until a bone breaks. Many fractures arising from osteoporosis heal with treatment, and a full

recovery can be expected.

However, some do not heal so well, and pain and difficulty using the part of the body involved occurs. This can lead to considerable disability, and elderly people in particular may become unable to look after themselves. As osteoporosis progresses, the bones in the spine collapse, the spine curves and some people may develop a disabling hunchback.

### **Prevention**

Building strong bones, especially before the age of 30, can be the best defence against developing osteoporosis, and a healthy lifestyle is important for keeping bones strong. Weight training using equipment such as barbells or dumbbells is beneficial. Walking and running are also helpful.

Eat a balanced diet rich in calcium and vitamin D. Get your calcium from a pint of milk or two small pots of yoghurt plus a 2oz (50g) chunk of cheese a day. Vitamin D comes from oily fish, enriched cereals or from just being out in the sunshine (but not too much!). Calcium supplements can help reduce bone loss in menopausal women. It is best to obtain your calcium from food, but if you cannot then consider a calcium supplement. Magnesium supplementation is also important; you can buy combined supplements (eg Osteocare) from a pharmacist. Don't drink too much alcohol - no more than two glasses of wine a day. Don't smoke, as smoking damages bones.

If you develop osteoporosis The severity of osteoporosis worsens with time, but the progression can be delayed and possibly reversed by good self-care and by treatment including HRT, calcium and vitamin C and D supplements.

Bisphosphonates are non-hormonal drugs; these help maintain bone density and reduce fracture rates.

Selective Estrogen Receptor Modulators (SERMs) are drugs that act in a similar way to oestrogen on the bone, helping to maintain bone density and reduce fracture rates specifically at the spine.

### **Women and complementary medicine**

There are many forms complementary treatment that can work alongside, or as an alternative to, 'conventional' medicine. These can be especially effective in dealing with women's health issues.

Acupuncture is an ancient system of healing developed over thousands of years as part of the traditional medicine of China, Japan and other Eastern countries. It restores and maintains health by the insertion of fine needles into acupuncture points just beneath the body surface. These points are in very specific locations and lie on channels of energy. Acupuncture is extremely effective in treating a wide variety of conditions, including menstrual problems, sports injuries and lower back pain.

Alexander Technique is based on the principle that the person functions as a whole and must learn to prevent unwanted, unnecessary and harmful habits such as unduly stiffening and tightening our muscles and joints and putting too much effort and tension into our activities. The Technique can help with a variety of physical problems including back, neck or shoulder pain and RSI as well as emotional issues such as poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, mood swings and eating disorders, personal interaction problems.



### **Violence and Women**

In recent years there has been a steep rise in violent and aggressive incidents taking place in the workplace or when working out in the community. Crime statistics and research both show that domestic violence is gender specific - the perpetrator is usually a man. **Work**

The greater the contact with the general public, the greater the risk of facing violence at work. You can be more vulnerable if you work alone or

outside normal hours. It is especially important that you are aware of specific techniques that can help you to stay safe. Remember that these are as important in your private life as in your working life. However trivial an incident may seem, always report it; not doing so could put others at risk. Reporting is also important because a complaint can be made against you by a client.

When out and about, either at work or in your daily life, remember to PLAN:

Prepare for the journey

Wear sensible clothing

Know your route

Tell someone where you are going and your expected time of return

Assess the risks

Look confident

Be alert with a sense of purpose

Watch your body language - stand tall

Carry a personal alarm

Avoid risk

Decline offers from strangers

Keep to familiar territory where possible

Don't make spur-of-the-moment decisions

Try not to use unlit cash machines

Keep a hand free

Never assume:

"It won't happen to me"

"It's only a short journey"

"They look respectable"

Do not ignore your instincts.

### **Domestic violence**

Domestic violence is physical, psychological, sexual or financial violence taking place within an intimate or family-type relationship that forms a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour. Any woman can experience domestic violence. Violence against women has serious consequences for their physical and mental health. Abused women are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, psychosomatic illnesses and eating and sexual (including reproductive) problems. It is estimated that one in four women will experience domestic violence at some time in their lives.

The effects on children are also devastating. For example, 70% of children staying with their mothers in refuges have been abused by their father. In one survey, three-quarters of mothers said their children had witnessed domestic violence, 33% had seen their mothers beaten up and 10% had witnessed sexual violence.

If you are a victim of domestic violence, contact the Women's Aid National Domestic Violence Helpline on 08457 023468.

### **Good Mental Health**

Stress is the second most commonly reported condition among working women, while depression occurs in women twice as often as in men. Rates of seasonal affective disorder, chronic depression, and eating and anxiety disorders are also higher.

### **Stress**

Stress is the natural physical reaction to dangerous or demanding incidents, producing a response involving nearly every organ in the body. Once the crisis is resolved the stress is resolved and mind and body return to normal. Problems arise when the sources of stress are constant and there is no time to rest and wind down between them.

For women, stress is a particular problem because they may have several sources of stress; as well as working, they often bear most of the responsibility for organising childcare and looking after the home.

We all react to stress differently. While some women seem to cope happily with large families and demanding jobs as well as a number of other activities, others with apparently fewer demands on them may be severely affected by stress.

### **Symptoms**

Symptoms of stress are wide-ranging but can include panic attacks, headaches, sleeplessness, tiredness, frequent colds and infections, changes in eating habits and irritability. Untreated, stress can lead to long-term problems such as heart disease and ulcers.

### **Treatment**

Serious stress problems may require medical treatment and counselling but there are things that you can do to help yourself:

A visit to the pool or gym, or even a walk at the end of the day, will help reduce stress and help you sleep

Try to have some time to yourself each day

Try to spend time doing something you enjoy each week; being able to think about something else is a good way of reducing the problem

Try relaxation techniques, such as meditation or yoga

Pace yourself by tackling one task at a time

Don't suffer alone. If you are feeling stressed it is important to talk to someone. Talking with women friends at work can be helpful, but if you need more help than this speak to your safety rep who may be able to suggest solutions to particular problems, eg emergency childcare. If you are ill as a result of stress it is important to see your doctor and get help, which may include time off to recover (some medical practices now run classes in coping with stress). It is important to ensure that your manager realises you are suffering from a stress-related illness, and it is particularly important to let them know if the stress is work related.

Remember that stress is one of the biggest problems in the workplace today; you are not alone. The CWU is seeking to address many of the issues that cause stress. If you feel there are issues that should be taken up by the CWU, see your local representatives and discuss the problem with them.

### **Depression**

Everyone has times when they feel unhappy and pessimistic. Although many people attribute their feelings of sadness or lethargy to the onset of depression, it's important to understand that medical professionals have specific indicators that they use to make a diagnosis of 'clinical' depression. Clinical depression describes a condition serious enough to require professional intervention, which lasts more than two weeks and is usually not caused by anything external.

#### **Symptoms:**

Irritability

Sadness

Exhaustion

Low self-image

Destructive self-criticism

Shame

Guilt

Manic behaviour

Suicidal thoughts or actions

Possible causes include your genetic makeup, personal experience, chemical imbalances in the brain and extreme stress

It is important to know that you can get help for depression, starting with your doctor. Based on your individual circumstances, your doctor may advise treatment that includes therapy, antidepressant medication or both.

Depression Alliance: 020 7633 0557 [www.depressionalliance.org](http://www.depressionalliance.org)

'Baby blues' or postnatal depression?

A week or so of the baby blues after childbirth is fairly normal. If the signs of depression last longer, it is possible that postnatal - or post-partum - depression is developing; get medical help immediately.

Postnatal depression can be treated successfully.

Symptoms include:

Excessive sleep

Increased crying

Feelings of worthlessness; feeling like a 'bad mother'

Low energy level

Sudden weight fluctuations

Suicidal thoughts

Thoughts of hurting the baby

Association for Post-Natal Illness: 020 7386 0868 [www.apni.org](http://www.apni.org)

### **Other forms of depression in women**

Anxiety disorders occur frequently in women, sometimes manifested in obsessive cleanliness or panic attacks. Often, anxiety disorders go hand in hand with depression.

Women with premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) suffer the symptoms of depression during this pre-menstrual period solely or mostly at this time. PMDD is a debilitating condition affecting 3-5% of women, and manifests itself as a combination of depression and anxiety coupled with physical and mental symptoms. Unfortunately, women often mistake PMDD for PMS (premenstrual syndrome) and don't seek help.

A woman who feels depressed and thinks she may also be entering menopause should be evaluated by a gynaecologist to determine whether her symptoms could be related to the hormonal transition.

She should also see a mental health professional, especially if her depression is severe or if she has been depressed in the past.

### **CONTACTS**

Work and health

Hazards Magazine Provides information on every aspect of health and safety at work PO Box 199, Sheffield S1 4YL [www.hazards.org](http://www.hazards.org)

**TUC** Represents almost seven million workers; campaigns for a fair deal at work, including health and safety issues 020 7636 4030 [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

### **Complementary medicine**

The organisations listed below will help you find a qualified practitioner

#### **Acupuncture**

British Acupuncture Council 020 8964 0222

#### **Alexander Technique**

Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique 020 7284 3338/

[www.stat.org.uk](http://www.stat.org.uk)

#### **Homeopathy**

Society of Homeopaths 01604 621400/ [www.homeopathy-soh.org](http://www.homeopathy-soh.org)

#### **Reflexology**

Association of Reflexologists 0870 567 3320

**Depression**

Depression Alliance

020 7633 0557 [www.depressionalliance.org](http://www.depressionalliance.org)

**The Samaritans**

08457 90 90 90

**Post-natal depression**

Meet A Mum Association (MAMA) Support network for women suffering from post-natal depression 020 8768 0123 (weekdays, 7pm-10pm)

[www.mama.org.uk](http://www.mama.org.uk)

**Personal safety**

Suzy Lamplugh Trust

Works to minimise damage of physical, verbal and psychological aggression on individuals and society

020 8392 1839 [www.suzylamplugh.org](http://www.suzylamplugh.org)

**Domestic violence**

Women's Aid

Support for women and their children, including a network of refuges nationwide

08457 023 468 [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)