

# women's workplace wellbeing



With the new Women's Health Strategy for England released over the summer, now more than ever is the time for workplaces to be focusing on supporting female employees. **Millie Browning** finds out more



**2022 has been a historic year for women's health in England.** Up and down the country, women and girls are set to benefit from better healthcare thanks to the Government's 'Women's Health Strategy' for England, published in July.

Detailing their 10-year ambitions and the actions they are taking to improve the health and wellbeing of women and girls in England,

This is not the first time workplace inequality surrounding healthcare has been established this year. Indeed, an online survey of adults aged 16 plus conducted by Brand Champions across January and February 2022 found that nearly six out of 10 women (59 per cent) said they would feel "not at all comfortable" talking about women's health issues with their human resources (HR) representative.

“Now is the time we need to be talking about these things and taking action to address them”

the strategy's aims include ensuring women's voices are heard, improving access to services and addressing any gender disparities.

The report also highlights the need for a "greater understanding of how women's health affects their experience in the workplace", setting out its intention to "normalise conversations on taboo topics such as periods and the menopause to ensure women can remain productive and be supported".

The study, *Talking about Health*, aimed to ascertain how happy people were to talk about health issues and what support was available in the workplace, with particular focus on women's health. So, what were the most poignant health concerns raised by respondents?

#### Breaking it down

The survey was completed by 1,677 eligible respondents, 58 per cent women and 41 per cent men (one per cent preferred not

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The pharmacy can be a safe space for women to access information and support.

to divulge their gender). Some 33 per cent of the women surveyed worked in education, health and other services, whilst 26 per cent worked in financial and legal activities, compared to six per cent and 34 per cent of men respectively.

Overall – perhaps unsurprisingly – there were a higher proportion of men working in the public sector, information and communication, other business activities, construction and quarrying manufacturing, transport and storage, utilities and waste.

When it came down to general wellbeing, men reported slightly better health with 70 per cent responding excellent, very good or good compared to 67 per cent of women. Additionally, those with private health insurance (whether supplied by their workplace or funded themselves) described their health as better than those without (76 per cent and 63 per cent respectively).

Mental health was another important topic explored throughout the survey. The results showed that 35 per cent of women had mental health concerns compared to 27 per cent of men. Age also played a factor as 56 per cent of those in the 16-39 age bracket expressed mental health issues, compared to 30 per cent of those aged

40-64 and eight per cent of those over 65.

#### Talking about health

Since 2020, there has been a decline in attention to employee’s mental and physical health, according to a 2022 survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). In fact, just 70 per cent of HR survey respondents agreed that employee wellbeing is on senior leaders’ agendas, a figure that has dropped five per cent since 2021.

This issue has appeared to highlight stigma attached to women’s health issues, with 58 per cent of women feeling uncomfortable talking about their health issues at work, according to research undertaken in the UK last year.

Despite these figures, there appears to be a real desire for workplaces to become safer spaces for women to voice their health concerns. Based on the *Talking about Health* report, Brand Champions found that when considering miscarriage, menstrual health and the menopause combined, 83 per cent of respondents would like to see these topics discussed more openly.

Additionally, a significantly higher proportion of women compared to men wanted certain topics to be

discussed in the workplace including:

- Sexual health and contraception
- Fertility
- Miscarriage
- Menstrual health
- Autism and neurodiversity
- Other mental health conditions.

A lack of discourse surrounding these subjects is – many feel – to blame for the absence of support systems businesses have in place to help these issues. Just 18 per cent of respondents reported that their companies had any policies or support in relation to women’s health.

“Women have been having periods, having babies and going through the menopause since the start of time and we still don’t have workplaces that suit and support those health issues,” says Lynn Capie, communications director at Switch Digital. “These are personal issues and it’s a difficult conversation to have but it’s only by having the conversation and normalising these subjects that we make any change.”

One of the key questions posed in the *Talking about Health* survey was “Which of the following would you consider taboo to talk about in your place of work and/or with a line manager?”

Whilst female respondents ranked heavy

## how can pharmacy help?

As well as employers, some Brand Champions survey respondents didn’t even feel comfortable discussing their health concerns with health care providers. Indeed, 15 per cent of women experienced women’s health concerns they neglected to speak to a healthcare professional about, highlighting a gap for pharmacy teams to play a vital role in creating a safe space for important conversations on so-called “taboo” topics.

OTC products are often a woman’s first step in their journey to seek help for a condition, whether that’s heavy menstrual bleeding or the menopause. Staff could target customers purchasing products aimed at these conditions and ask if they need any extra advice.

Alternatively, posters and leaflets concerning women’s health conditions, including those that signpost them to further resources, could be made available in the pharmacy. These may be especially useful for those women who do not wish to have personal conversations, but need – or want – support.

Health awareness campaigns are also an excellent opportunity to kickstart conversations. October, for example, is World Menopause Month with World Menopause Day falling on 18 October. Pharmacies may advertise the campaign within the store and teams could use this as a conversation starter with any menopausal or peri-menopausal customers.

Fundamentally, whether it’s practical advice or just a listening ear, pharmacy staff are in the perfect position to be that support system for any woman that could need it, but – due to long established stigma – might be too embarrassed to seek it.



Women can feel like some health care topics are too taboo to discuss in the workplace or even with healthcare professionals.

## Investing in this kind of training is a no-brainer

highly skilled role models who we need in our organisations, and we need leading our organisations. It's no surprise we've got such a big gender gap in the workplace. Menopause and menstrual health are a huge part of that.

"We haven't really had to have these conversations as we've never had as many women and people going through the menopause in the workforce as we do now. Certainly, in the past, we wouldn't have had women in senior positions, so now is the time we need to be talking about these things and taking action to address them or the problems are just going to be perpetuated."

### Employers' part

For Claire, it's important for employers to take note of evidence and information gathered by the 'Women's Health

they know about symptoms, understand the impact that symptoms can have on people at work, know where to seek help if it's something they are experiencing themselves and also how to be supportive colleagues and line managers."

Dr Brewer suggests having a dedicated women's health champion in the workplace. "They could provide education or host lunch and learn sessions for men and women to raise awareness about issues affecting women and – equally – about men's health as well," she says. "[They could] just raise awareness so people are happy to talk about things in the same way we have done with mental health issues."

For Matt, investing in this kind of training is a no-brainer. "Why would you want people coming into the workplace who feel they're held back, can't be themselves and have to leave issues they're suffering with at the door?" he questions.

"I think that if you believe authenticity will drive productivity, positivity and a healthy workforce then you have to invest in [gender health awareness]. Otherwise, you just go through platitudes like 'let's just stick a fan on a desk' – it cannot just be limited to that.

"It's a general understanding and empathy across the whole business and whole workforce – this is going on in our community and the ignorance is stopping people speaking about it and therefore getting the help they need." **tm**

menstrual bleeding (54 per cent), period pain (48 per cent) and other gynaecological conditions (39 per cent) as the top three conditions deemed too taboo to discuss, nearly half of the male respondents simply said they "don't know" which issue to choose.

These figures suggest there is significant scope to open up conversations around these topics, something Dr Sarah Brewer, medical director at Healthspan, suggests should start from an early age. "Equip young people with the facts, tell them what's happening and that there are hormone cycles that will affect how half of the people in the classroom are going to feel at particular times of the month," she says. "[We should] use proper [medical] words and say what's happening and put it into context with how it's going to affect you in the future; how it could affect your work, how it could affect your family, how it could affect relationships. Perhaps we could even give people ideas about what they can do to manage the symptoms."

"It has to start with education," agrees Matt Falla, director and MD, Investment Management at Evelyn Partners. "We've come such a long way in the last five years with mental health first aid training and I think the same now [needs to happen] with periods, parts of pregnancy and the menopause."

Speaking alongside Dr Brewer at Brand Champions inaugural 'Championing Women's Health' conference, Matt continued: "If you can have a conversation with someone where you know they're not going to be squeamish, and actually are going to listen to you – that'll be a massive thing.

"But education has to start years before it hits a workplace. We must start to be open about some things that are going to affect every woman to some degree and yet are still referred to with very loose, fluffy words like 'the change'. It beggars belief in today's day and age that this is the case."

**From the top down**  
Of the 1,677 respondents to the Brand Champions

survey, 21 per cent of men said they had senior management responsibilities and were one of the main decision makers for the business overall, compared to just 10 per cent of women.

Conversely, 68 per cent of women in employment said they would feel more comfortable talking to

mutually exclusive? Could the reason we see such a lack of female managers be because all too often they are leaving their jobs at a crucial stage due to menstrual or menopausal symptoms, as opposed to receiving the help they need?

According to Claire Knox, business

## 68 per cent of women in employment said they would feel more comfortable talking to a female line manager about women's health issues

a female line manager about women's health issues (with less than one per cent saying they would feel more comfortable talking to a male).

These statistics highlight the gap left by a lack of female managers and also suggest that more can be done to ensure that there are appropriate people, policies and support in place within the working environment.

But are the two

psychologist and founder and director of See Her Thrive, this is absolutely the case. "We hear from women who, because of the loss of confidence, the impact of symptoms and the fact that we don't yet have the level of support in workplaces, feel that they have no other choice but to reduce their hours or leave the workforce altogether," she says.

"And we're talking about really talented,

Strategy'. "If employers do take this on board, and bring it into their diversity and inclusion work, we would hope that the infrastructure will be there, but that relies on people taking action and that's going to look different for each organisation," she says.

"What we would strongly recommend, based on what we've seen work well, is things like ensuring all staff are trained in menopause so