

CIPD

Report
November 2023

Menstruation and support at work

The CIPD has been championing better work and working lives for over 100 years. It helps organisations thrive by focusing on their people, supporting our economies and societies. It's the professional body for HR, L&D, OD and all people professionals – experts in people, work and change. With almost 160,000 members globally – and a growing community using its research, insights and learning – it gives trusted advice and offers independent thought leadership. It's a leading voice in the call for good work that creates value for everyone.

Report

Menstruation and support at work

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Acknowledgements

The CIPD is grateful to the individuals and organisations who gave their time and expertise to review our survey. This includes:

- Clare Knox, CEO & Organisational Psychologist, See Her Thrive
- Kathleen Riach, Professor of Organization Studies, University of Glasgow
- Dr Krystal Wilkinson, Reader (Assoc Professor) in HRM, Manchester Metropolitan University
- Professor Kate Sang, Academic FCIPD
- Chiara Cocco, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Heriot-Watt University.

1 Introduction

This report outlines the results of our survey of over 2,000 women, aged 18–60, who currently or have previously menstruated while in employment. The aim of this research is to understand employees' experiences of menstruation and support at work. Our survey included boosted representation around several protected characteristics including race, disability and sexual orientation.

Our research looks at the type of menstruation symptoms being experienced and their impact at work. We ask about menstrual health conditions and diagnosis. We also explore the difference workplace support can make and the importance of creating an open and healthy workplace culture where people can talk about symptoms and the support they need. We look at the types of adjustments that are seen to be most helpful when managing symptoms at work and we also explore the impact of menstruation symptoms on employees' ability to stay in and progress at work.

In this survey, 'menstruation' refers to the monthly period in which bleeding occurs. 'Menstrual health' has a broader meaning and recognises that while menstruation is a natural bodily function, some people experience physical and/or mental health symptoms and challenges linked to menstruation. These range from painful, heavy and/or irregular periods and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) through to formally diagnosed chronic health conditions such as endometriosis, adenomyosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). Some of these conditions can have significant impacts on daily life and can also affect fertility.

While we predominantly talk about women in relation to menstruation and menstrual health, we recognise that it can impact some transgender and non-binary people who will require support and flexibility relevant to their needs.

Offering appropriate support in the workplace can help people feel included, offer dignity and reduce embarrassment. It can increase employee attendance, but also legitimise absence where this is needed. It can increase employee performance, engagement, retention and employer branding.

Employers can improve employee experience by creating environments and work cultures that are menstruation friendly, and providing support for menstrual health conditions that are underpinned by the principles of compassion, empathy and inclusivity.

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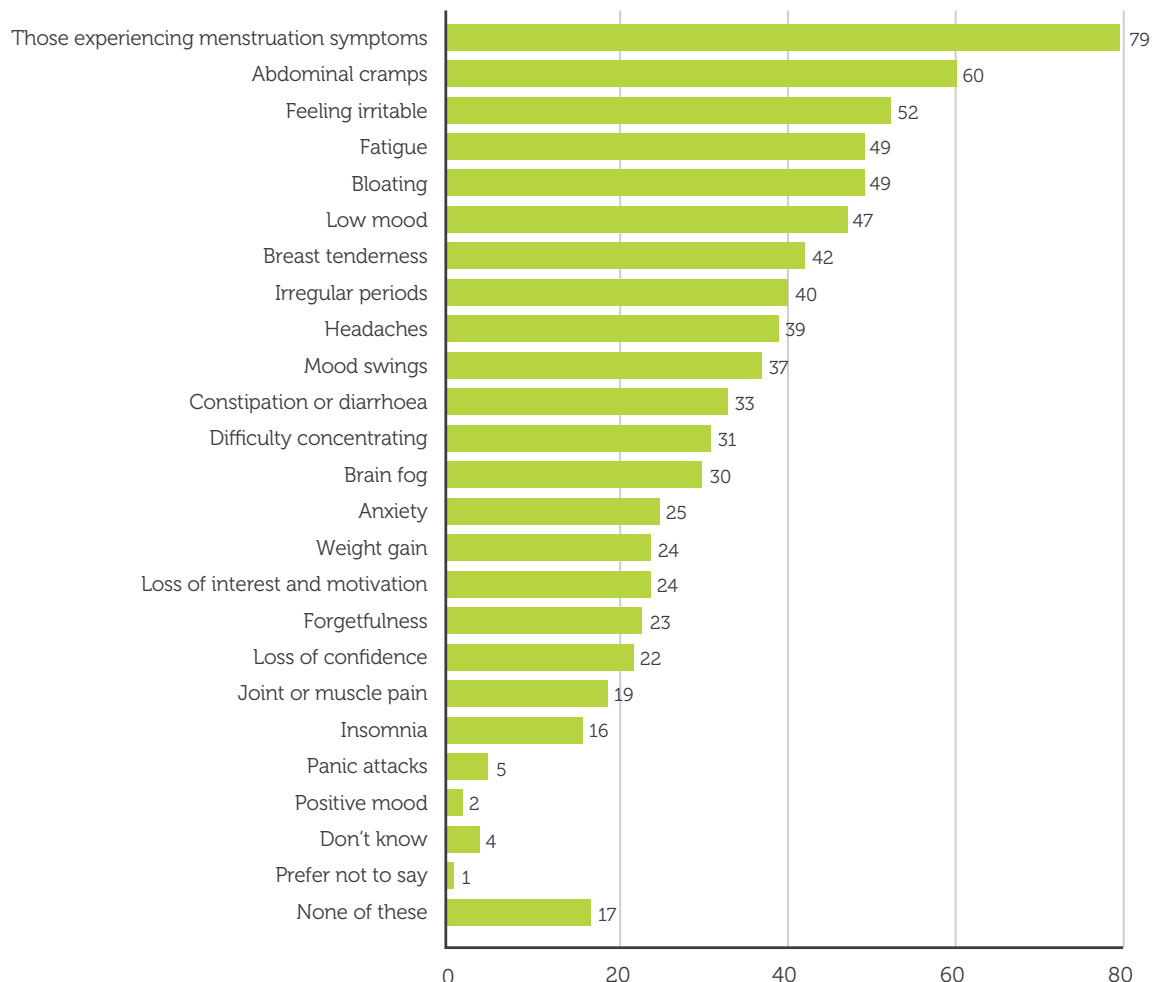
Prevalence of menstruation symptoms and menstrual health conditions

Over half of our respondents (57%) currently menstruate each month and 92% say they have previously menstruated each month while in employment.

Almost four in five have experienced menstruation symptoms

Seventy-nine per cent of respondents say they have experienced menstruation symptoms. The most common symptoms include abdominal cramps (60%), feeling irritable (52%), fatigue (49%), bloating (49%) and low mood (47%), but there are a wide range of symptoms experienced (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Which, if any, of the following symptoms do/did you typically experience when menstruating? Please select all that apply. Please think about any symptoms that occur(ed) before, during, or after when you menstruate (%)



Base: all UK working women aged 18–60 who have menstruated while in employment (n=1,938).



Those aged 18–34 are more likely to experience a high proportion of the symptoms listed compared with those aged 35–54 and 55+.

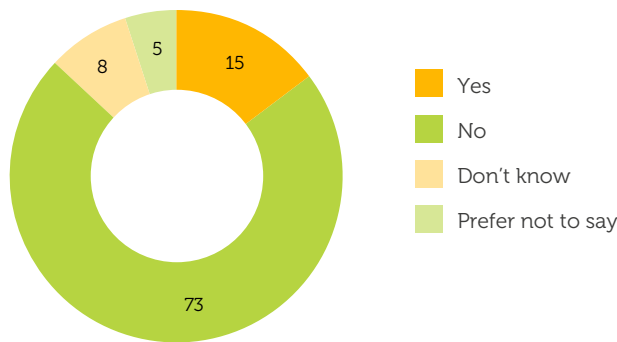
Those respondents who have a disability are also more likely to experience a high proportion of symptoms compared with those who don't, as are those who have a self-reported menstrual condition.

Fifteen per cent have a menstrual condition

Fifteen per cent say they have a menstrual condition such as endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) or fibroids; 73% don't have a condition (see Figure 2). Respondents aged 45–54 are significantly more likely than all other age groups to say they have a menstrual health condition, as are employees with a disability (25%, compared with 12% without).

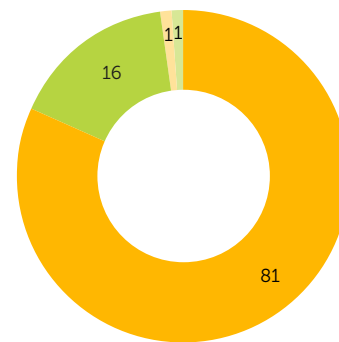
Eighty-one per cent have had a formal diagnosis of their menstrual condition, while 16% have not (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Do you have a menstrual condition? (%)



Base: n=2,060.

Figure 3: Have you had a formal diagnosis for your menstrual condition? (%)



Base: all with a menstrual condition (n=300).

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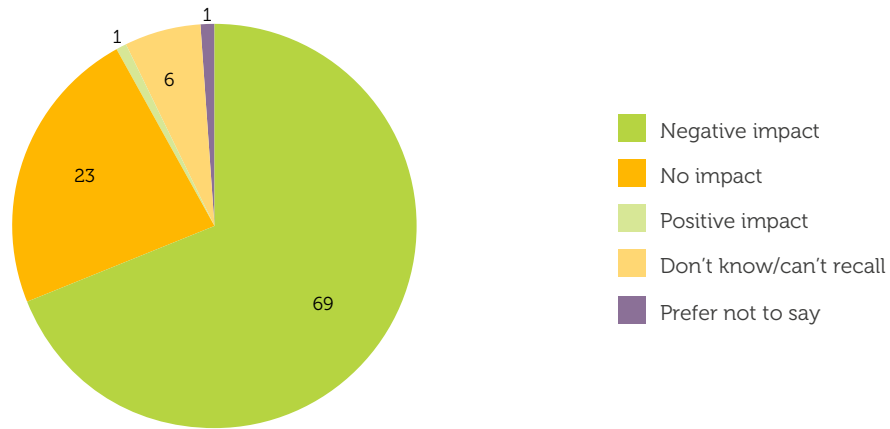
Workplace experiences and support

More than two-thirds of employees experience a negative impact at work due to menstruation symptoms

Around seven in 10 employees (69%) who have experienced symptoms from menstruation report that they have had a negative impact at work (Figure 4). This proportion rises to 81% reporting a negative impact where people have a diagnosed menstrual condition and 82% in the case of a self-diagnosed menstrual condition. Employees with menstrual symptoms are also significantly more likely to report a negative impact if they have a disability – 80%, compared with 66% who don't have a disability.

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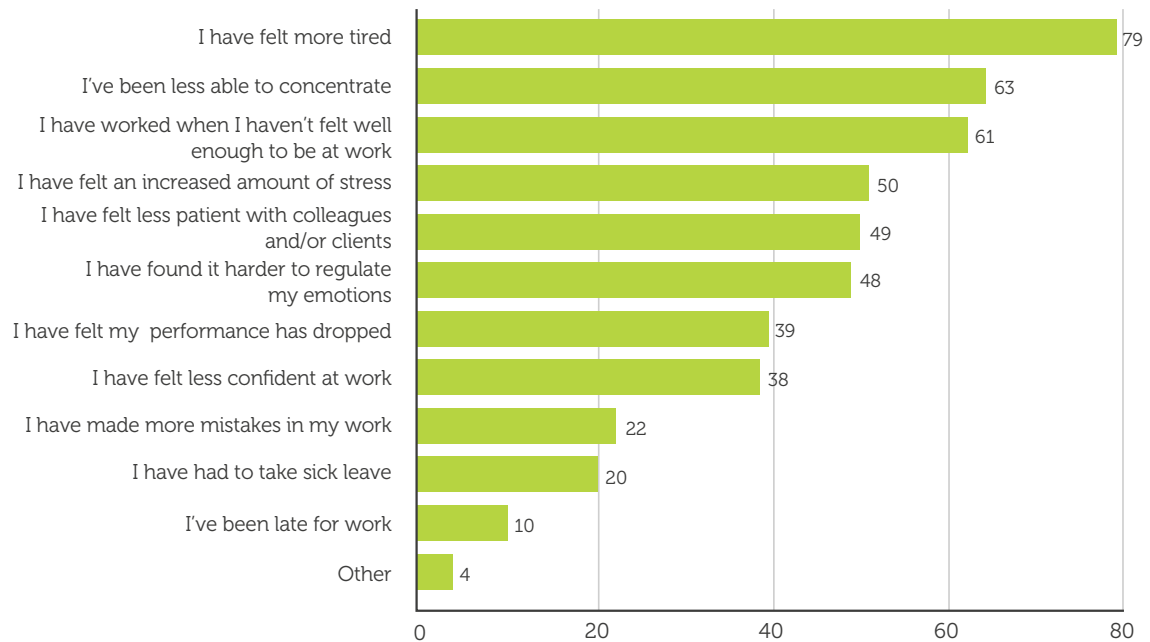
Figure 4: In general, what impact, if any, have these symptoms had on you at work? (%)



Base: all who have experienced symptoms from menstruation (n=1,525).

The kinds of effects people have experienced are many and varied, but the main ones are feeling more tired (79%), working when they haven't felt well enough to do so (61%) and feeling less able to concentrate (63%) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: The ways in which employees have been impacted at work due to menstruation symptoms (%)



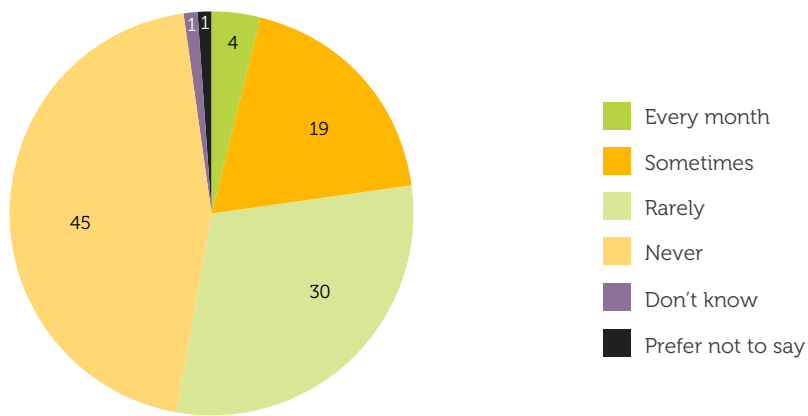
Base: all who say their period has had a negative impact (n=1,052).

Most people feel unable to talk to their manager about their menstrual cycle if they're off work

We asked how often, if at all, employees had been unable to go to work because of menstruation symptoms. More than half (53%) had been unable to at some point and, for a small minority (4%) this was the case every month (see Figure 6).

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Figure 6: How often, if at all, have you been unable to go to work due to symptoms related to menstruation?

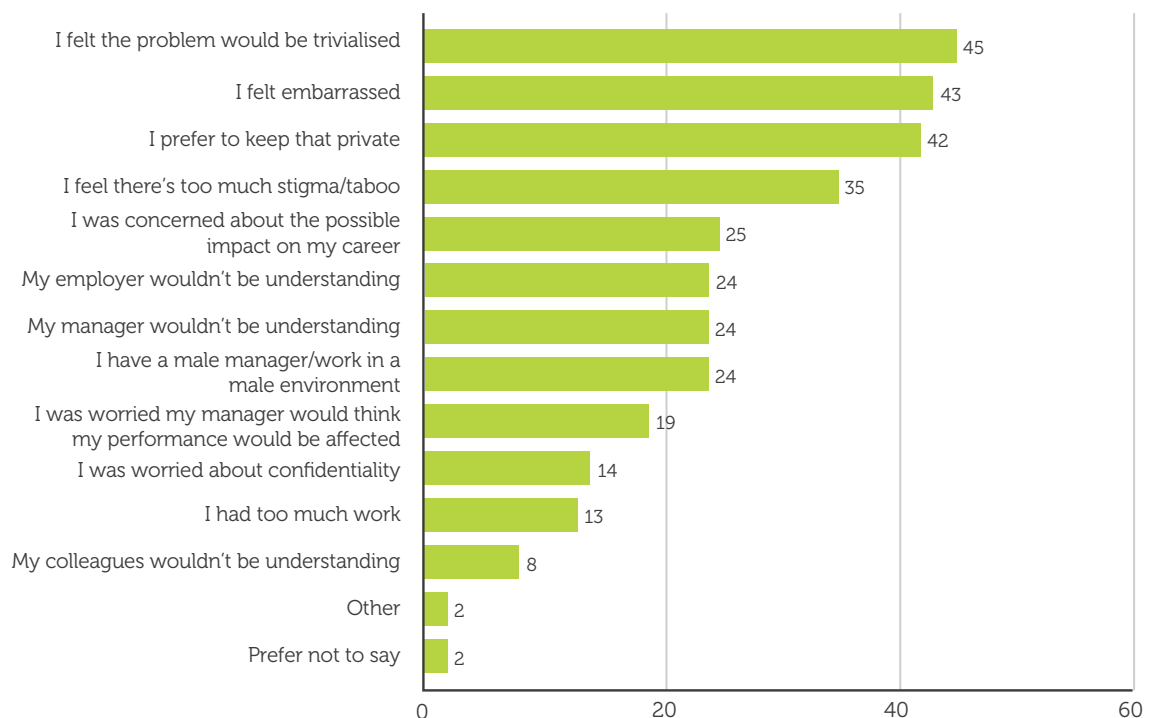


Base: all who currently menstruate (n=1,174).

When asked if they had told their manager that the reason for not being able to go into work was because of their menstrual cycle, around half of employees (49%) said they never tell their manager it's related to their menstrual cycle. Just one in five (20%) always tell their manager that their absence is related to their menstrual cycle, while a further one in four (24%) sometimes do. Employees are less likely to tell their manager if the manager is male (57%, compared with 44% if the manager is female).

When asked why they felt unable to tell their manager the real reason they were unable to go into work, employees reported that the main reason was that they felt the problem would be trivialised (45%), followed closely by feeling embarrassed (43%) and that they prefer to keep the matter private (42%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Why have you felt unable to tell your manager the reason you were unable to go into work? (%)



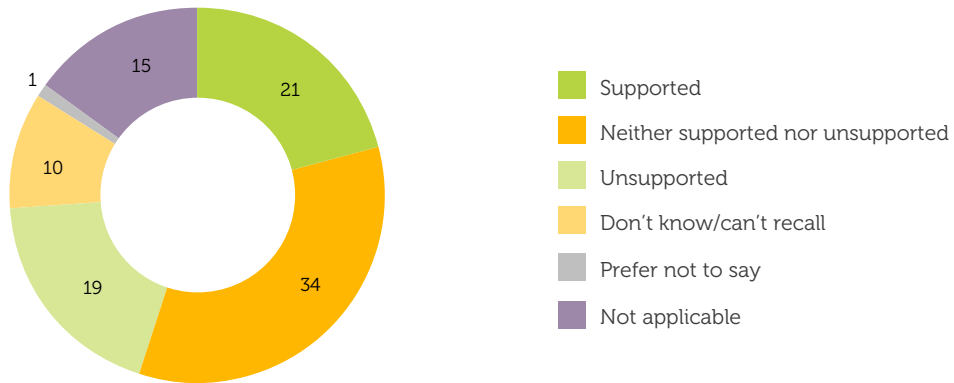
Base: all who sometimes/never say issues are related to their menstrual cycle (n=400).

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Employees feel more supported by colleagues than by their employer or manager

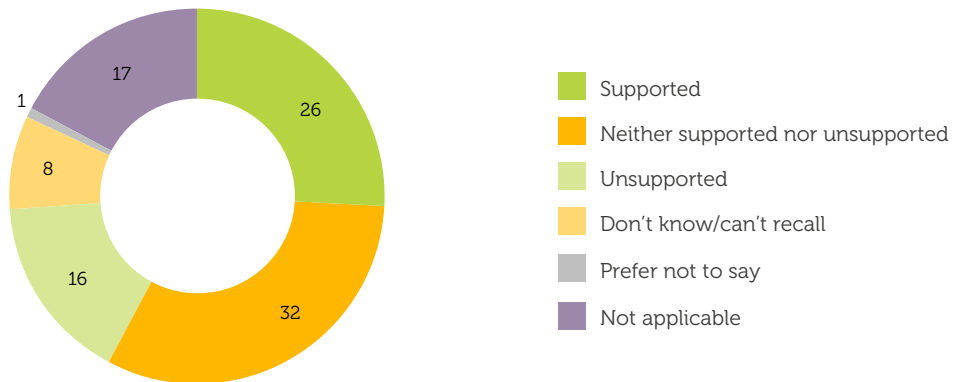
Our findings show that most employees don't feel a strong sense of support in their organisation in relation to their menstrual cycle. People are much more likely to feel supported by colleagues than by their employer or manager (41%, compared with 21% and 26%, respectively) (Figures 8, 9 and 10).

Figure 8: How supported by their employer people feel in relation to their menstrual cycle (%)



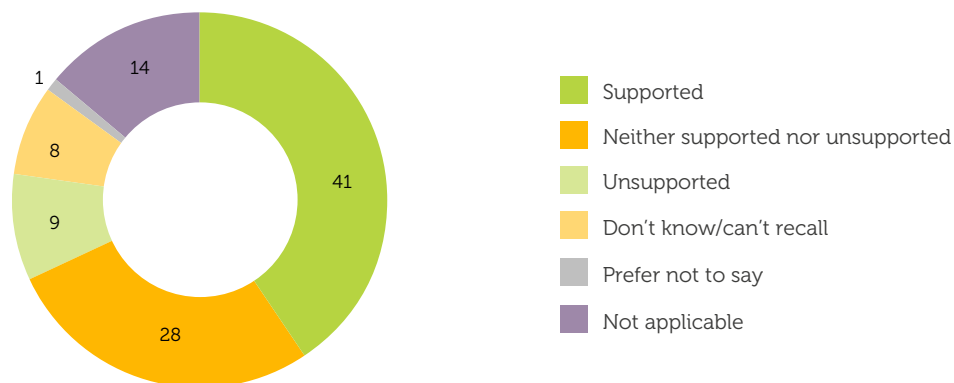
Base: all those who have menstruated while in employment (n=1,938).

Figure 9: How supported by their line manager people feel in relation to their menstrual cycle (%)



Base: all those who have menstruated while in employment (n=1,938).

Figure 10: How supported by their colleagues people feel in relation to their menstrual cycle (%)



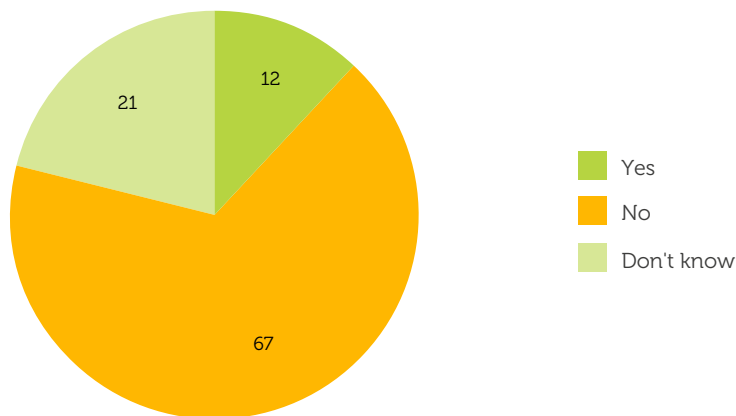
Base: all those who have menstruated while in employment (n=1,938).

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Employees want support but only 12% of employers provide it

Just over one in 10 (12%) employees report that their organisation provides support for menstruation and menstrual health, for example in the form of a policy, guidance or training. One in five didn't know if support was available, but two-thirds (67%) said there is no support available (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Does your organisation provide support for menstruation and menstrual health (eg policy, guidance, training)? (%)



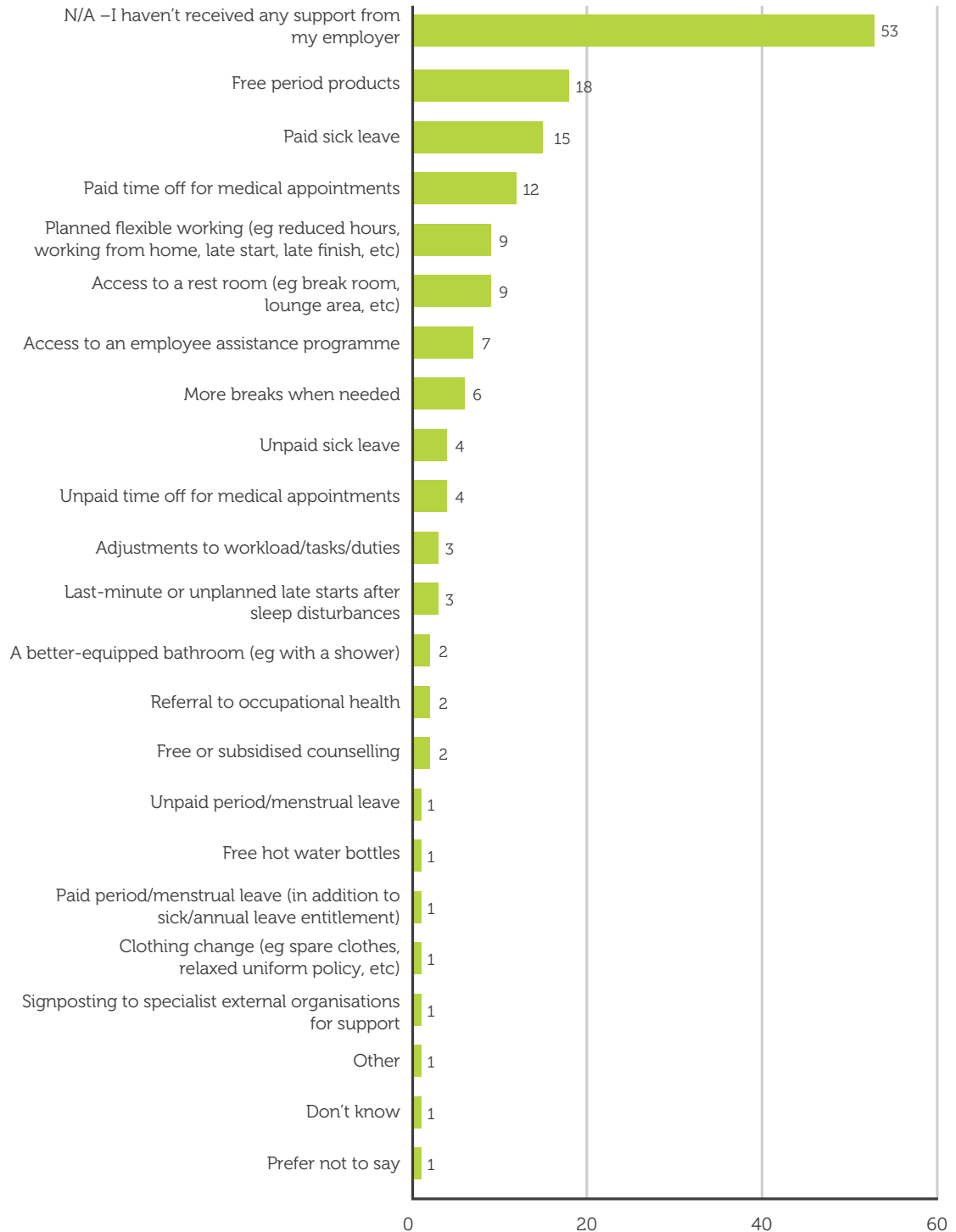
Base: all (n=2,060).

Overall, less than half (44%) of employees who have experienced menstrual symptoms have received some type of support from their employer. The most common type of support is free period products (18%) followed by paid sick leave (15%) and paid time off for medical appointments (12%). Any other type of support is even less commonly available (Figure 12).

The provision currently on offer, although limited, chimes to some extent with the support that our respondents would find most helpful, with free period products, paid sick leave and paid time off for medical appointments all rated in the top five. However, the other two types of support that would be most valued are planned flexible working and more breaks when needed – fewer than one in 10 employees have had access to either (Figure 13).

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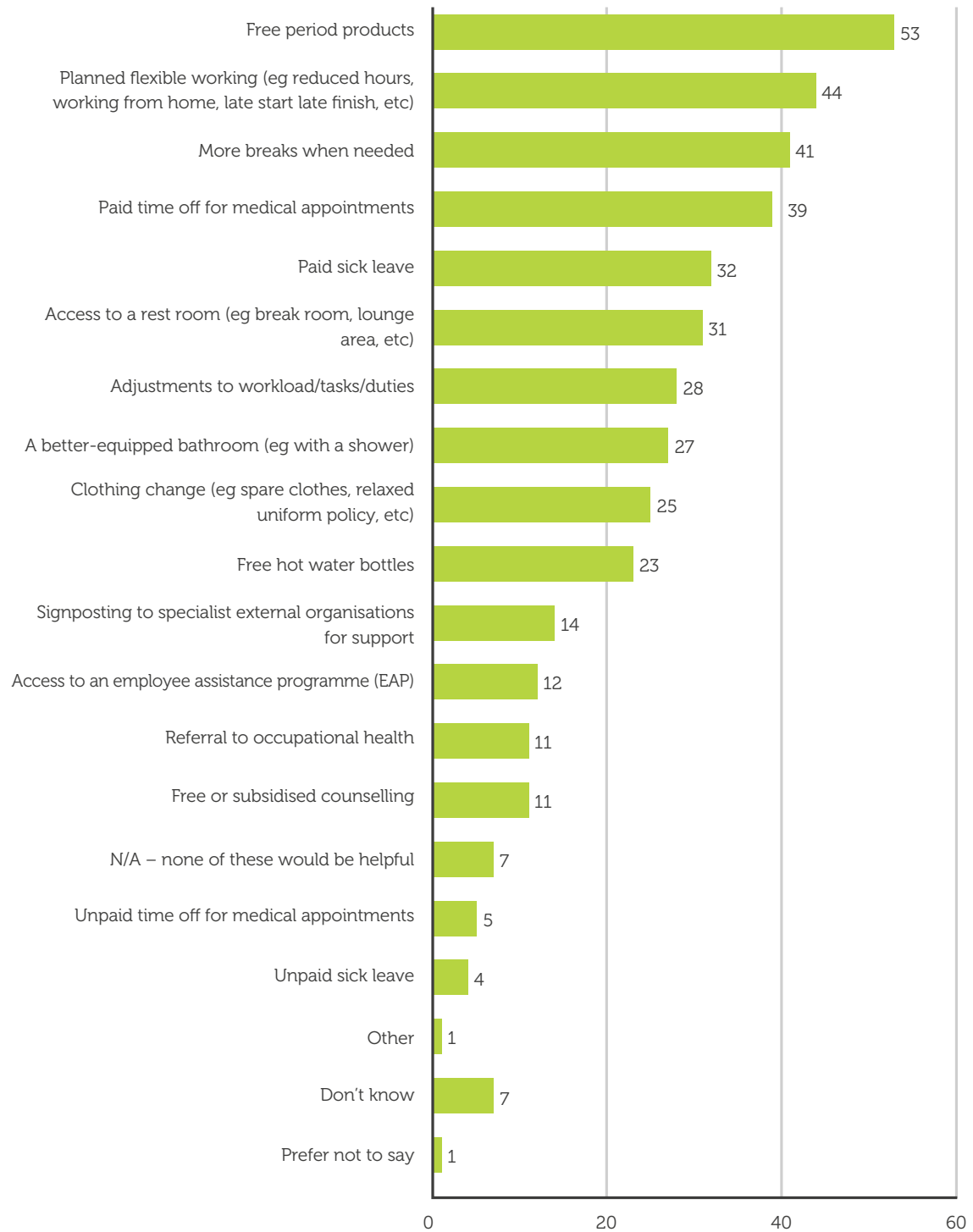
Figure 12: Which, if any, of the following types of support have you ever received from your employer following your experience of symptoms related to menstruation? (%)



Base: all who have experienced symptoms from menstruation (n=1,525).



Figure 13: The type of support that would be most helpful to manage the symptoms of menstruation at work (%)



Base: all who have menstruated while in employment (n=1,938).



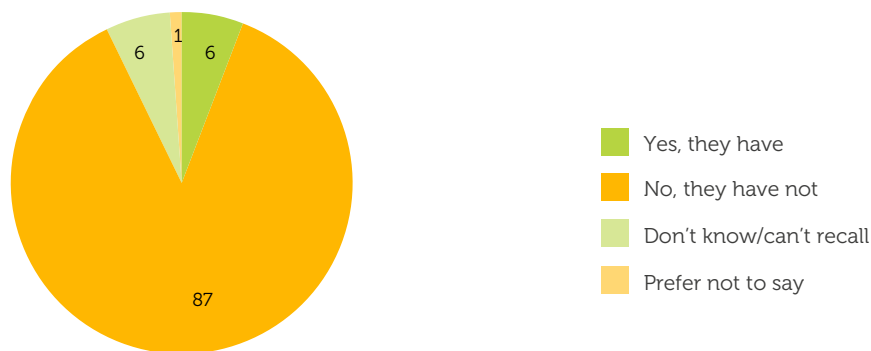
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The wider impact of menstruation at work

Six per cent say that menstrual symptoms have impacted them in a way which has led to formal action at work

While a substantial 87% say their menstrual symptoms have not, 6% say their menstrual symptoms have had an impact that has led to formal action. Those with a self-reported menstrual health condition are more likely to say their symptoms have impacted them in a way which has led to formal action at work (such as performance management, sickness triggers, disciplinary) (10% compared with 5%), as are those with a disability (10% compared with 5% without) and those who identify as LGBT+ (10% compared with 6%) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Have menstrual symptoms ever impacted you at work in a way which led to formal action? (%)

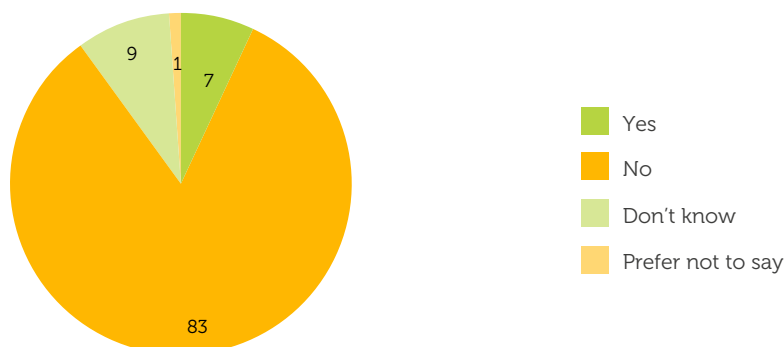


Base: all who have menstruated while in employment (n=1,938).

A similar proportion (7%) feel they have been discriminated against at work because of menstrual symptoms

However, 83% say they have not been discriminated against at work because of menstrual symptoms. Those employees with a disability are more likely to say they feel they have been discriminated against (11% compared with 6% without) as are those who identify as LGBT+ (10% compared with 6% who do not). Finally, those who have a male (8%) manager are more likely to say this than those who have a female (4%) manager (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Do you feel you have ever been discriminated against at work because of menstrual symptoms? (%)



Base: all who have menstruated while in employment (n=1,938).

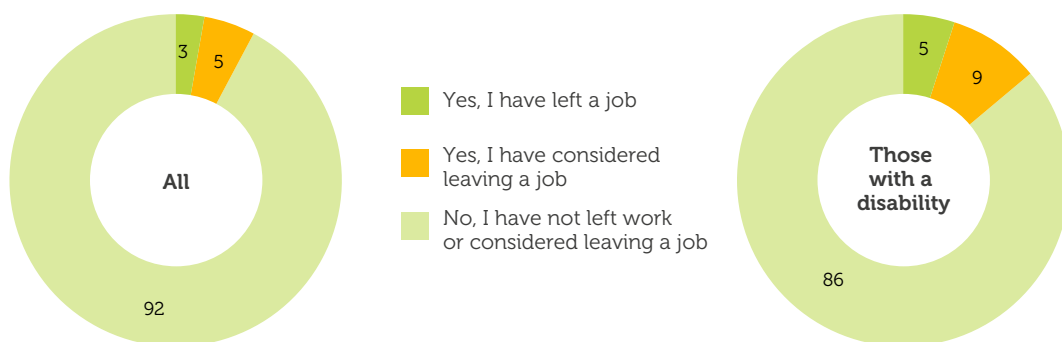
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A lack of support has prompted 8% to leave or consider leaving their jobs

Overall, 3% say they have left a job due to a lack of workplace support in relation to their menstrual symptoms and a further 5% have considered leaving (Figure 16).

Respondents with a self-reported menstrual health condition are more likely to say they have either left or considered leaving a job for these reasons (18% compared with 5%) as are those who have a disability (14% compared with 6% of respondents without a disability). Those who identify as LGBT+ are also more likely to say this (13% compared with 7%), and senior managers (11%) are more likely to say this than managers (8%) and non-managers (7%).

Figure 16: Have you ever left, or considered leaving, a job due to a lack of support in relation to your menstruation or menstrual health? (%)



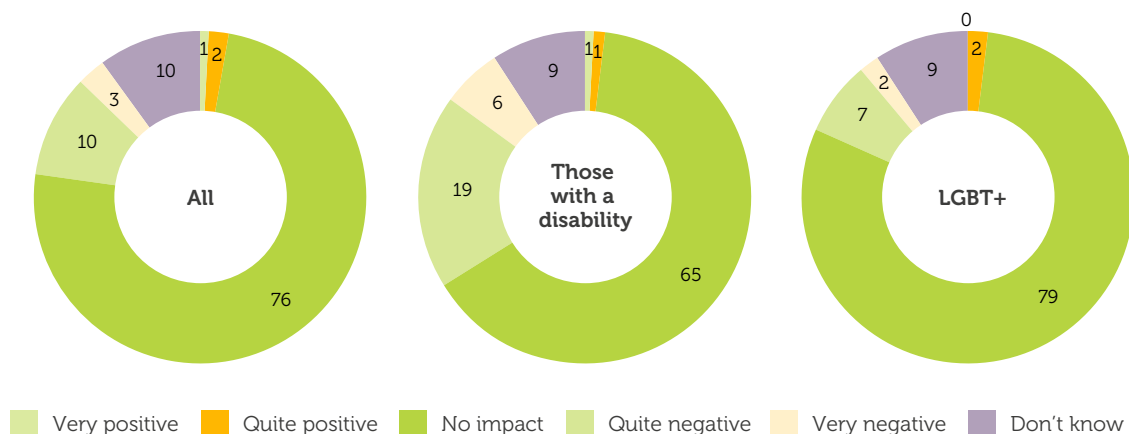
Base: all: n=1,938; those with a disability: n=401.

More than one in 10 say their menstrual symptoms have had a negative impact on their career progression

Twelve per cent of respondents say their menstrual symptoms have had a negative impact on their career.

This increases to 29% for those with a self-reported menstrual health condition (compared with 8% without) and 24% for those who have a disability (compared with 9% who do not). It is also higher for those and who identify as LGBT+ (22%, compared with 11% who do not), showing the intersectional nature of experiences (Figure 17).

Figure 17: What impact, if any, have your menstrual symptoms had on your career progression? (%)



Base: all: n=1,938; those with a disability: n=401; LGBT+: n=243.

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Interestingly, the proportion saying that their menstrual symptoms have had a negative impact on their career progression is also higher for those who work part-time (15%) compared with full-time (11%), and senior managers (15%) are more likely to say this than managers (13%) and non-managers (12%).

Workplace support makes a difference, with those who work in organisations without support more likely to say their menstrual symptoms have had a negative impact on their career progression (14%, compared with 5% who work for organisations with support).

Younger respondents (aged 18–34) are more likely than other age groups to say their menstrual symptoms have had a positive impact on their career progression (4%), with only 2% of 35–54-year-olds and 1% of those who are 55+ years saying this.

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Implications and recommendations for organisations

Supporting menstrual health

Build an open and inclusive culture

Normalise menstruation in the workplace through supportive discussions and open dialogue.

Create awareness and tackle stigma

This could include:

- acknowledging menstruation as a normal life experience in wellness blogs
- having a dedicated section for information and resources on the company intranet
- engaging with awareness days/weeks for specific menstrual health issues
- including reference to menstruation and menstrual health conditions in policies and guidance.

Develop a support framework

This can include policy provision, support pathways, guidance and training. A menstruation and menstrual health policy should be cross-referenced with other relevant policies, such as:

- health and wellbeing
- women's health
- sickness absence
- long-term health conditions and/or disability
- flexible working
- menopause transition.

It is also important to:

- review organisational procedures and processes to ensure they are aligned
- communicate policies and procedures to managers and staff.

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Train and support people managers

Managers need to be confident, comfortable and inclusive when discussing menstrual health in the workplace. Training should include information about the diversity of menstruation experiences and the importance of sensitivity and discretion. Ensure managers know where to go for information, such as HR, occupational health and/or external providers.

The aim should be to create a culture where this topic is not considered taboo, while recognising that some individuals will see it as a personal and private matter, and this should be fully respected.

Managing menstrual health conditions

In addition to the recommendations above, organisations can offer specific support for employees experiencing menstrual health conditions, which draw on the principles in our [Long-term health conditions guide](#). Recognising menstrual health issues as genuine fluctuating health conditions and embedding appropriate support within your wider health and wellbeing framework can improve employee experiences. This can be done by:

- **Embedding good people management practices**

Employees will be more likely to be able to manage their menstrual health condition and thrive in the workplace where an organisation has good people management practices throughout the employee lifecycle. Managers should be trained in how to support all employees based on individual need and be able to signpost to helpful support.

- **Creating the climate for successful sharing**

Many employees find telling others about their menstrual health conditions challenging, not least because of their personal nature and the long-standing cultural stigma. However, sharing this information is a necessary step to access support and work adjustments. It can also improve working relationships, enable access to peer support, and help people feel more authentic at work. To encourage sharing, policies and practices should make explicit reference to menstruation and menstrual health, and make it clear that any sharing of information will be treated discretely and with compassion.

- **Ensuring employees have easy access to information and support**

This includes any rights under relevant legislation (such as the UK's Equality Act) and company policies and provisions around absence, flexible working and wellbeing. Signpost any relevant wellbeing support under your employee assistance programme and wider health and benefits package. There can be significant psychological health issues associated with menstrual health conditions, but employees may feel these are less legitimate to raise. Managers should be prepared to discuss psychological wellbeing if an employee raises a menstrual health issue.

- **Managing absence and performance management with compassion and flexibility**

Managers should be confident to provide flexible support as part of performance management and sickness absence processes. This means taking account of any underlying health issues such as a menstrual health condition. Absence management approaches which include trigger mechanisms are likely to be experienced as an additional stressor by employees with long-term menstrual health conditions. Taking a flexible and individualised approach to absence management can help prevent unhealthy presenteeism and avoid unfairly penalising employees with ongoing menstrual health conditions.



- **Providing access to, and training in, work adjustments**

Some employees may require adjustments to their job role, work environment or work schedule to manage their menstrual health condition alongside their work. The nature of the adjustment will differ depending on many factors, including the nature of the job, the organisation and the employee's unique needs.

Background to the survey

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This survey has been conducted using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc UK panel of 2.5 million+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys.

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. The total sample size was 2,060 women aged 18–60. Fieldwork was undertaken between 2 and 10 August 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures are unweighted (aged 18+).

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Incorporated by Royal Charter
Registered as a charity in England and Wales (1079797)
and Scotland (SC045154).

Issued: November 2023 Reference: 8500 © CIPD 2023