

Insights

MENSTRUATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Jun 08, 2023

SUMMARY

This article focuses on the impact that menstruation can have on an employee's ability to work in the workplace generally, the social stigmas preventing open discussions about menstruation in the workplace and how employers can support those who experience this.

Note that any references to a 'woman', 'women' or 'female(s)' in this blog are intended to be gender inclusive and also include members of the non-binary and transgender community who menstruate.

Periods affect women in different ways. They can be very painful, debilitating and can prevent women from carrying out day-to-day work in the way they would like. Common symptoms include mild to severe abdominal cramps, nausea, fatigue, bloating, sudden changes in mood, and back pain.

Those with endometriosis can suffer particularly badly. 1 in 10 women suffer from endometriosis. It is a chronic condition that can have a significant impact on the day-to-day lives and activities of women who suffer from it. It is a condition where cells similar to those in the lining of the womb grow elsewhere in the body. Unlike the cells growing in the lining of the womb, which leave the body as a period during menstruation, there is no way for the blood produced by these cells growing elsewhere to leave the body. Common symptoms include chronic pain, a lack of energy and depression.

Unfortunately, but perhaps unsurprisingly, many women feel embarrassed by the subject and are concerned about the stigma attached to taking time off work due to menstruation. Despite being a normal bodily function, it can still be a taboo subject in the workplace. This stigma can lead to employees feeling that they are unable to be honest and open with their employers when they require sick days or reasonable adjustments to be made, or they believe there is a lack of support at work.

FACTS AND FIGURES

A number of surveys offer an insight into how menstruation affects women in the workplace:

WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO TO HELP WITH MENSTRUATION IN THE WORKPLACE?

It is safe to say that there is stigma attached to talking openly about menstruation, despite it affecting half of the world's population for a very significant part of their life. However, the above statistics might encourage employers to support their workforce through menstruation as a health and safety matter.

Given how many people experiencing menstruation report feeling unsupported at work and unable to be honest about the reason for needing time off, creating an open working environment where these issues are de-stigmatised is likely to help with concerns around experiencing symptoms in the workplace. De-stigmatisation and an awareness of how menstruation can affect women is important to making female employees feel supported and valued at work and to promote gender inclusivity. This also benefits the employer, as staff are generally likely to be more productive and have less time off work if supported. The employer is also likely to benefit from understanding the real reason for a female employee's absence (which could be a monthly occurrence), as this could help to foster more trusting working relationships.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the way we work has fundamentally changed and many employers now recognise the benefit of offering hybrid working. This form of flexibility is beneficial to employees who are experiencing menstrual difficulties, as this can help to alleviate concerns around showing symptoms in the office or experiencing pain in public. This is something that employers should bear in mind and be flexible (where possible) when considering supporting staff. However, we should not forget that hybrid working is only possible for about one third of the UK workforce.

Depending on the nature of the work, employers could also consider making changes to its uniform (if there is one). Wearing white trousers or skirts is likely to provoke feelings of anxiety about leakage when menstruating, which may affect an employee's productivity.

The following points may also be considered as measures to support female employees:

- Providing 'rest rooms' where those experiencing symptoms such as fatigue, cramps or nausea can take time out to rest;
- Providing back supports and making period and pain relief products readily available in the office;
- Ensuring that there are sanitary bins in all toilets, so that trans men and non-binary members of staff also have access; and

- Ensuring that employees are aware that menstruation is not a taboo, difficult or embarrassing subject, and encouraging openness through raising awareness and perhaps training.

To sum up, there are plenty of steps that proactive employers could take to offer support to staff during menstruation. However, the most important step is likely to be creating a working environment where open conversations can be had about menstruation, so that managers and other colleagues are aware of what this means and are equipped with the required information to be able to offer support.

RELATED PRACTICE AREAS

- Employment & Labor

MEET THE TEAM



Catherine Turner

London

catherine.turner@bclplaw.com

[+44 \(0\) 20 3400 4943](tel:+442034004943)

This material is not comprehensive, is for informational purposes only, and is not legal advice. Your use or receipt of this material does not create an attorney-client relationship between us. If you require legal advice, you should consult an attorney regarding your particular circumstances. The choice of a lawyer is an important decision and should not be based solely upon advertisements. This material may be "Attorney Advertising" under the ethics and professional rules of certain jurisdictions. For advertising purposes, St. Louis, Missouri, is designated BCLP's principal office and Kathrine Dixon (kathrine.dixon@bclplaw.com) as the responsible attorney.