disadvantage because they may need time off during the menopause to access healthcare or other sources of support. Working time arrangements should be flexible enough to ensure that they meet the needs of menopausal women, who may at times require access to more flexible working, including starting later after difficulties sleeping.

Risk assessments should consider the special needs of menopausal women and ensure that the working environment will not make their symptoms worse. Issues that have been highlighted among the general working population include temperature and ventilation controls, such as the use of fans. In the case of firefighters it is likely to include being able to cool down quickly after wearing fire kit or post-incidents. Assessments should also cover issues such as access to cold water. Female members should also be advised on the importance of maintaining aerobic fitness levels and taking weight bearing exercise throughout their working lives.

What can the FBU do?

- Ensure that representatives and officials have a good understanding of the menopause and its effects;
- Support women members who feel they have been discriminated against because they are menopausal;
- Encourage all representatives to treat women members who are suffering because of the menopause with respect and understanding;
- Identify women's groups within the service or other groups that women can talk to.

How can women help themselves?

Women should be proactive in researching their own symptoms. There is a lot of information online at sites like NHS Direct and Menopause Matters. Some steps which women can take to help themselves are:

- Eat healthily – research has shown that a balanced healthy diet can help alleviate some symptoms;
- Eat regularly;
- Wear natural fibres under fire kit;
- Exercise regularly to maintain fitness and aerobic capacity and to ensure that weight-bearing exercise is carried out to maintain bone density;
- Consult with their GP on management of the menopause and to ensure that any symptoms are not due to any other causes;
- Speak to Occupational Health or a trusted manager about their symptoms;
- Drink plenty of water;
- Do not smoke;
- Ensure alcohol intake is at or below recommended levels.

Helpful websites

- http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/
- http://www.womens-health-concern.org/help/focuson/focus_dietmenopause.html
- http://www.womens-health-concern.org/help/factsheets/fs_menopause.html
- http://www.project-aware.org/Managing/exercise.shtml
- http://www.menopausematters.co.uk/menopause.php

Fire Brigades Union
Bradley House
68 Coombe Road
Kingston upon Thames
Surrey KT2 7AE

Tel: 020 8541 1765
www.fbu.org.uk

FBU Good Practice Guidance for Menopause

HEALTH SAFETY & WELFARE

The Fire Brigades Union, with the assistance of the National Women's Committee and the Institute of Occupational Medicine, have developed this good practice guide to give assistance to representatives and officials who may need to provide advice to women members.

The document details the way members can be helped in the workplace; although it should be recognised that this is a very personal experience and different levels of support may be needed. As a result of this, the menopause is an issue that is not often talked about publicly but, with women making up 47% of the general working population, there is a need to better understand the process and any possible implications on health and work. Recent research has identified that most women have some or no difficulties working through this transition period; however 5% of women report having severe difficulties.

Further information can be sought from the organisations listed at the end of the guide and members should contact a representative of the Fire Brigades Union for advice.

What is the Menopause?

The menopause is a natural part of the ageing process and the term menopause is the point at which menstruation stops. As with many processes related to ageing, there is not a fixed point at which menopause occurs but, on average in the UK, the age is 52 years (with a usual range of between 45 and 55 years). The onset of the peri-menopause, the period before menopause, is associated with symptoms including hot flushes (or flashes), menstrual irregularities, night sweats, sleep disturbances, irritability and skin irritation. In some women these symptoms also continue after the menopause and for others these symptoms may not occur at all. It is estimated that this period of change can last from 4 to 8 years.

The menopause occurs in all women and begins when the ovaries spontaneously fail to produce the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. The resulting low and changing levels of hormones, particularly oestrogen, are thought to be the cause of menopausal symptoms in many women. These symptoms include the following:

- Hot flushes or flashes;
- Night sweats;
- Sleep disturbances;
- Fatigue;
- Poor concentration and memory;
- Weight gain;
- Irritability;
- Mood disturbances;
- Skin dryness;
- Increased risk of osteoporosis post menopause;
- Increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

Not every woman will experience all of these symptoms and they may not occur continuously through the peri-menopause and post-menopausal period.

What can employers do?

Employers have a responsibility to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees and they are required to carry out risk assessments under the Health and Safety Management Regulations, which should include any special risks for women going through the menopause.

They also have a duty not to discriminate under the 2010 Equalities Act. As such, women should be able to expect support and assistance during what is, for some, a difficult time.

Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) should ensure that all managers have been trained to be aware of how the menopause can affect work and what adjustments may be necessary to support women who are experiencing the menopause. In relation to symptoms, night sweats may disrupt sleeping therefore advising members on sleep management is key. Ensuring members know where help and information is available and ensuring members consult their own GP to ensure health symptoms are not due to any other underlying causes.

FRS's can ensure that, as part of a wider occupational health awareness campaign, issues such as the menopause are highlighted so that all employees know that the employer has a positive attitude to the issue, and that it is not something that women should feel embarrassed about. All women should be given information of how they can get support for any issues that arise as a result of the menopause.

Because of the way that society treats the menopause, many women will feel uncomfortable going to their line manager, especially if it is a man, and other options should be available such as Occupational Health, Trade Union Representatives and Equalities Representatives. Guidance on how to deal with the menopause should be freely available in the workplace. The Service Intranet, if one is available, should have information relating to the menopause in their 'Women's Health Section' or 'Occupational Health Section'.

Sickness absence procedures should make it clear that they are flexible enough to cater for menopause and related sickness absence. Women should experience no