

Women's Health South Tees



February 2024

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Background

Healthwatch South Tees, the operating name for Healthwatch Redcar and Cleveland and Healthwatch Middlesbrough, is the independent champion for local people who use health and care services. We take your experiences of these services, good and bad, to those who fund or deliver services and highlight good practice, tell them what doesn't work and suggest how it can be improved.

Through our information and signposting service and local engagement we became aware that more and more people were contacting us about menopause. The most common questions were:

- Where can I get more information?
- How do I get the support I need and where from?

We also noticed a disparity in the experiences of people going to the GP for support.

As a result of this, we produced an [information booklet](#) which we shared on our websites. However, we felt that more needed to be done and this became one of our work priorities for 2023/2024.

Our Work

In response to the publication of our information booklet we received requests from the following organisations to deliver awareness sessions to the people they support.

- Creative Minds
- NUR Fitness
- Pioneering Care Partnership
- Department for Work and Pensions

At Creative Minds and NUR Fitness we had the opportunity to engage with women from different ethnic backgrounds, providing information about Healthwatch and the menopause.

We were made aware that menopause is still a social stigma and a taboo subject in many minority communities and some ethnicities experience menopause earlier than white women. Our sessions were well received, and we have been invited back on numerous occasions.



The discussion gave us the opportunity to have a better understanding of menopause and we were also able to discuss and ask questions which many of us won't normally do outside the group.



Our [Community Champions](#) also raised awareness of the challenges that other groups in society face in relation to menopause, such as those with a learning disability and the transgender community.

When looking for support for people we also learned that within South Tees there is a gap in support for British Menopause Society (BMS) menopause specialists. The nearest ones are Durham or Leeds. This, coupled with the feedback we had received regarding the challenges people had experienced seeking support from their GP, helped us to decide to hold an event on World Menopause Day, which was open to professionals and the public, to share good practice and raise awareness.

The Event

To ensure that our event reached as wide an audience as possible we promoted it to local people as well as professionals working in the field or those who support female communities across South Tees.

We made the decision to film the event so that knowledge and information can be shared in order for it to continue to inform learning and be used as a resource tool for everyone.

To ensure that the event met the needs of local people we conducted a poll with the Perimenopause Support UK Facebook group, to inform us what the event should focus on.

The group has over 25,000 members and the poll reached 3.6k of its members, the top topics being:-

- GP's talk 14% / hormone replace therapy (HRT) 11%
- Supplements 10%
- Nutrition 9% / Exercise 6%

On the registration form for the event, we also asked attendees to tell us what they were hoping to learn from the event. We had 132 responses to this question.

- 62 responded about support, either for themselves or patients they work with.
- 44 respondents wanted to have more knowledge and education.
- 9 were about symptoms.
- 9 asked about alternatives to HRT and 2 were specific to HRT.
- 8 were general questions or observations.

This feedback helped us to inform which key speakers would be beneficial at the menopause event and what other information we could provide.

Keynote Speakers

We secured the following keynote speakers for our event.

1. Dr Angela Wright

Dr Angela Wright is a GP, menopause specialist and Clinical Sexologist and trained in cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) for menopause. Angela is passionate about women's health and sexology and is frequently asked to talk about menopause. She is a registered trainer for the British Menopause Society (BMS) and Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (FSRH), involved in training future menopause specialists.

During her presentation Angela talked about:-

- What are the symptoms of menopause?
- How long does this all last?
- Benefits of HRT.
- Breast Cancer: HRT Impact on Risk.
- Types of HRT.
- Teething problems on HRT.
- What about Testosterone?
- Non HRT Options.

2. **Alison Cullen, A.Vogel**

Alison is a Nutritional Practitioner and Educational Manager for A. Vogel, which is a foundation established by the Swiss herbalist and naturopath Alfred Vogel. They grow organic herbs from which they make herbal remedies to assist people in their journey to better health.

Alison talked about:-

- Hormones.
- Perimenopause and supplements that may help.
- Menopause Support.
- Research and supplements that support.

3. **James Walker and Joe Robinson, Sustain Nutrition**

Sustain Nutrition work with ladies to help them regain control and lose weight effectively during menopause. Their method is about changing mindset and working with clients individually.

James and Joe's presentation focused on:-

- How to master your menopause.
- The 5 main symptoms of anxiety, fatigue, weight gain, brain fog and lack of sleep.
- They were joined by one of their clients on stage who explained how she had lost 8 stones during menopause by changing her nutrition, exercise and mindset while working with Sustain Nutrition.

Stalls

To help people find out the range of support available within South Tees we invited a diverse range of stall holders, each passionate about supporting women through menopause. The stalls were:

- **Deanna Thomas Therapies** – a licensed Acupuncturist and specialised in providing comprehensive support for ladies going through menopause.
- **Helena Hyde Hypnotherapy** – providing solution focused hypnotherapy which can help physical and mental symptoms and aid ability to cope.

- **Alison Grosvenor** – A pharmacist and complimentary therapist & aromatherapist specialising in menopause support.
- **Nur Fitness** – healthy lifestyle and support for BAME women.
- **Red Balloons** – Walks to support mental wellbeing for women in Teesside.
- **For Goodness Sake** – Independent family run health and wellness store.
- **Everyone Active** – Health & wellbeing support via physical activity with a holistic approach to enhance emotional wellbeing.
- **Suzanne Barbour** – A Life Coach and Menopause Mentor working with people 1:1 and in groups to learn how to 'Master their Menopause'.
- **Fairy Bikers** – Authors writing about mid-life crisis.
- **Samaritans/ Suicide Prevention** – Mental health support.
- **Breast Screening.**
- **Temple Spa** – Wellbeing products to help during menopause.
- **STHNHSFT / Patient Involvement.**

Case studies

Throughout the event we heard from community speakers who shared case studies of lived experiences from different perspectives i.e. BAME community, someone with a learning disability and from a male partner's perspective.

Case Study – BAME

I am one of the directors of Nur Fitness, and we work with BAME woman in Teesside, especially from the Arabic and south Asian heritage.

**What age did you start perimenopause / menopause or
What is the average age of the community you're
representing?**

I haven't started menopause myself but I work with women who usually start from aged 40 and upwards.

I think I am getting a few symptoms for peri-menopause now, I only noticed this on summer holidays when I wasn't as active. Most of the time I am very active, not just structured fitness I do 3-5 outdoor walks per week which keeps my mental health in a better place and since I have been back I have stopped noticing the symptoms again.

**What were your symptoms? Or what are the main
symptoms of the community you're representing?**

The biggest challenge I have seen in my work is the lack of understanding and tabooess around Menopause and Peri-menopause is mostly unheard of in our community, it's a generational problem. Women suffer on their own.

**How did you find help and/or support and what was it like?
What help/or support is available to the community you
support and what was it like**

**My work has to be open the door to get BAME women to learn and talk
about this.
I was also asked to be on the campaign for this for Women in Sport to
represent BAME women in 2021.**

**What could have made this experience better for you or the
community you support**

**We need to educate women in a language they can understand and
make the information more culturally appropriate.
We also need to give them information on what can help them and also
an understanding of how sports can also help them.**

**What can people learn from your or your communities
experience?**

**Nur Fitness believes, education on this topic is key. In regards to the
BAME communities it needs to be in a manner that they can understand
taking in their cultural needs eg living with in laws.
We also advocate sports and fitness strongly helps with menopause
symptoms.**

Learning Disability Case Study – delivered by Tracy Porter, Manager of a care home for adults with a learning disability.

Case Study – Learning Disability

This case study is from the perspective of someone who works with a lady going through the menopause and has autism.

Who are you or what community are you representing? (gender, age, ethnicity, disability etc)

I am a Registered Manager of a residential house for people with autism, Learning Disability, behaviour that challenges, and additional co-morbidity issues. We have a mixed group here ranging from aged 24 to 65, and have both males and females living together, most of whom have lived together for 30 years.

- 1. What age did you start perimenopause / menopause? Or**
- 2. What is the average age of the community you're representing?**

One of our individuals, a lady of 51 with autism, epilepsy, hyperthyroidism, and a moderate LD, has been going through menopause for several years.

**What were your symptoms? Or
What are the main symptoms of the community you're representing?**

She has not had a period for 8 years, and we have seen a change in her presentation through those years, ranging from mild irritability to more severe mood swings, flashpoint behaviour, lack of motivation, increased tiredness, and night sweats. It has been really tricky to decipher which of these symptoms were as a result of menopause, or which were attributed to the other medical issues she has, as some symptoms were the same as hyperthyroidism, behaviour that was already part of her presentation and diagnosis, and some could have also been changes in her epilepsy which can also happen with age. All of this being exacerbated by the fact she wasn't able to tell us how she was feeling.

**How did you find help and / or support and what was it like?
What help and / or support is available to the community you support and
what was it like?**

As a company we have been talking about menopause for a long time, mainly due to the staff who have either been through it or have started going through it, and because we were acutely aware that the ladies in our care would be nearing that age. It has been very helpful to speak to colleagues (I have gone through menopause myself so have first-hand experience of the debilitating symptoms and issues) and build a picture of what menopause feels like so us as individuals, and therefore to better understand what it might look like in people with autism and learning disabilities and those with co-morbidity issues.

Our GP surgery in were very helpful; they listened to what staff explained to them so they could understand how the lady was presenting and feeling, and took our concerns seriously. Having said that, sometimes there were no answers. She had additional blood tests and these ruled out other health issues. We spoke to male and female GP's and Nurse Practitioners in our surgery and were able to start her on HRT, first in patches and then in tablet form as the patches were unsuitable due to incontinence issues. We also spoke to our Consultant Psychiatrist about the changes we had witnessed and he was able to give advice about the changes in her mental health which were probably due to menopause, and offer support for her with tweaks to her medication.

In short, we were very lucky; colleagues who 'wouldn't let it lie' and persevered to get support for our lady through some adversity and seemingly dead ends, but ultimately we were able to get her the right help for her own symptoms and experiences and she is flourishing.

**What impact has this had on you or the community you represent?
What could have made this experience better for you or the community
you support?**

More information needs to be readily available for people with autism and additional needs, either being supported in care, or for their carers and families, so that we can support people at the earliest possible time.

**What can people learn from your or your communities experience?
(include key messages)**

Having knowledge of what menopause might look like in our client group has been invaluable to us, but a lot of what we discovered was due to the experiences of our colleagues, friends and family. Now that people are more empowered to talk about their own experiences with menopause, I am hopeful that we will be able to better understand the needs of the people we support and be able to put help and support in place sooner.

Male partner Case Study – delivered by Richie Andrew, South Tees Public Health, based on feedback received.

Case Study – Partner

We have asked a couple of partners to share their experience of living with someone going through perimenopause

Who are you or what is your relationship to the person experiencing symptoms of perimenopause/ menopause?

Husband (for now!)
My wife is experiencing symptoms of perimenopause.

What age did they start perimenopause / menopause?

48 years old
42

Do you know what their symptoms are?

Hot flushes/ sweats · Vivid horrific nightmares · Mood swings · Frustration
· Changes in body shape/ weight gain · Lethargy/ lack of motivation · Anxiety
· Self-doubt · Feeling of being overwhelmed

Brain fog, confusion, irrational behaviour and thoughts, hot sweats – especially on a night she needs the windows open and a fan on all night. More anxious than she has ever been.

What could have made this experience better for you and/or person experiencing the symptoms

For me – understanding what symptoms she could experience during menopause, why she has the specific symptoms she's experiencing.

For her – More specialized Drs who have more awareness and knowledge about different treatment options suited to her as an individual.

I don't know how you can make it better. Everybody who is born a woman goes through it. There is more awareness for women, but men don't talk about it.

1.What impact has this had on the dynamic's of your relationship?
2.How did it make you feel seeing someone you love experiencing menopause?
What help and / or support is available for you? Aswell as the person experiencing the symptoms?

1. Not changed (she's still the boss)
2. Really sad due to seeing the person I love become anxious, doubting herself and lacking in the confidence she had always been full of.

Feeling unable to help or change anything for her was really frustrating and wanting to take the symptoms away, which I couldn't do, which was also very hard.

The physical changes didn't concern me, but I know it made her feel less attractive.

3. I don't know/ very little for support me. For my wife, we had to pay a lot of money for a private consultation to help identify the right treatment for her.

1. It has had a massive impact on our relationship; especially the irrational behaviour which is so understand; everyone in our family is walking on eggshells.
2. It has been very difficult and upsetting because these things come from nowhere and I just can't get my head around it. I try to help by encouraging her to do things together or on her own, but sometimes I can't get through to her.
3. I know there are some groups online for blokes, but I wouldn't talk to anyone because men don't talk about these things.

There is medical support for my wife like therapy and medication but she hasn't been able to take medication that agrees with her.

What can people learn from your experience? (include key messages)

- Be patient.
 - Be understanding.
 - Offer support day to day.
 - Have a positive mental attitude to keep her spirits up.
 - Have lots of alcohol in the fridge!
- Always expect the unexpected... lie low!

Event Feedback

We asked for evaluations to be completed by the 170 attendees and this is what they said:

“Brilliant event, well organised and managed. Great range of speakers, covering complimentary subjects and all very well received by attendees. Fantastic work everyone you should be very rightly proud of the event, but more importantly the impact this will have for women to be better able to manage menopause symptoms”.

“What a wonderful event – not only were the key speakers, including those speaking about personal experience exceptional, engaging, knowledgeable, relatable and informative but the event itself felt warm, inviting and inclusive. Thank you”.



Speaker Feedback

Keynote Speaker – Dr Angela Wright

“My knowledge has increased, but we need for more professionals to also have this level of information to share and support us”.

“What a brilliant talk – so insightful. A breath of fresh air to hear a medical professional so knowledgeable”.

“I feel much better informed as well as reassured and comforted. Excellent delivery with great humour. Thoroughly enjoyed Angela’s presentation. Thank you”.

Keynote Speaker – Alison Cullen

“After listening to this lady I will be looking into herbal remedies for menopause, good insight to using herbs”.

“Fantastic knowledge and understanding of herbal remedies which has improved my knowledge in this area. This will be useful for signposting and advice when speaking to my clients”.

“Good knowledge and interesting ideas for helping the symptoms of menopause”.

Keynote Speaker – Sustain Nutrition

“Lovely to hear men showing empathy and knowledge of a huge area, medical and menopause – excellent”.

“Interesting case study – more information on what exercise and nutrition would help”.

“I already have some knowledge of ways to lose weight etc however, the shared story was amazing and very encouraging”.

One thing that would improve the support given to you during your menopause journey.

“More training, awareness and knowledge for GP’s for support, diagnosis and treatment options as being dismissed can compound things quite considerably”.

“More general awareness and knowledge about all things menopause is needed especially in the workplace and community”.

“A wider awareness from younger people about the menopause. I believe there is a better awareness and understanding from the 40+ but not so much from younger people. Also involve more men and get them talking”.

Is there anything we haven’t covered today that you’re interested in knowing more about?

“More understanding and awareness, with and for, those communities who find it difficult to identify menopausal symptoms due to other health conditions or disabilities”.

“More awareness of what local support is available for women in the community of South Tees, e.g. women’s health hubs”.

“Information and awareness of how to manage peri menopause and post menopause symptoms”.

Engaging women in the improvement of services

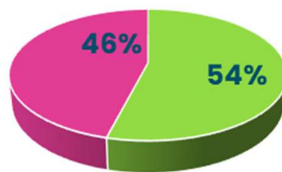
Further to the publication of the Women’s Health Strategy for England and the announcement of national investment in women’s health hubs, we distributed a survey to the attendees of the event, on behalf of the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENICB) to gain feedback from women to improve access to women’s health services, health information, experiences of health services and the quality of care and health outcomes. Within this we also included questions at the request of South Tees Public Health on cervical screening.

Survey responses

Overall, we had 180 responses to the survey, with 90 of those being from the South Tees area.

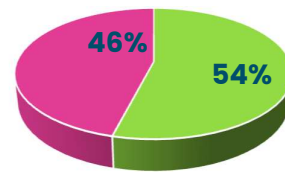
Below are the findings in relation to the question regarding menopause assessment and treatment for South Tees.

1. Have you ever accessed care for a menopause assessment and treatment?



■ Yes ■ No

2. If yes, do you feel that the care you received was helpful?



■ Yes ■ No

3. What do you think could be improved?

We received 33 responses to this question from the South Tees area. The main themes were:

More support from GP – 40%

Most of the comments referred to needing a more understanding approach from GPs by feeling listened to, having more time and face to face appointments.

'GP has not offered any wider menopause support. This would have been helpful at the beginning when I was dealing with severe symptoms and not yet on HRT'.

'I feel that my concerns should have been taken seriously, explored further, and not just put down to stress'.

'Listening and understanding the problem'.

Consideration of family history and other conditions – 20%

'Doctors being more understanding of menopause and the impact it has on neurodivergent women. Also need support for obese women during menopause too.'

'I have never been provided with any information about menopause treatment options, even though I am currently in induced medical menopause due to chemotherapy treatment. I was informed this would happen and more or less expected to get on with it.'

'By educating their staff on women's hormones and looking at family history to see what other women in the family have suffered.'

'I have a family history of breast cancer so more advice about the risks of HRT & cancer would be helpful.'

Dedicated service for menopause management -12.5%

'Provision of a dedicated service for menopause management. Holistic assessment to assess menopausal needs and future health risks. A listening ear, building trust in the clinical team who will review my care, face to face and or digital access if no changes to treatment were needed.'

'Would like a menopause clinic rather than having to go through GP.'

'I was prescribed wrong HRT patches after several visits to try and get help. Would like a menopause clinic rather than having to go through GP.'

Educating staff/training – 12.5%

'Education for all health professionals about the symptoms of the menopause and for them to give a balanced view of the risks and benefits.'

'Knowledge and awareness of this subject to know what treatment options are out there and can be offered to individuals. We need more local GP Menopause Specialists or more in depth training for existing staff.'

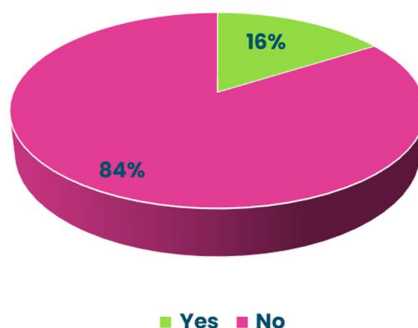
'More information and awareness within GP surgeries.'

Follow up appointments – 7.5%

'Follow up – I had a phone call but feel I could have had a better follow up or a second follow up as things settle.'

'More follow up on when HRT is used.'

4. Do you feel there is enough support currently available for menopause assessment and treatment?



5. What do you think could be improved?

We received 48 responses to this question from the South Tees area. The main themes were:

Menopause Clinics/Specialists – 38%

'Having to go through GP makes it tricky as it is hard to get an appointment. Drop-in menopause clinics ran by nurses would be useful for those who want initial advice and information.'

'More out of hours clinic sessions for working age women so they don't have to leave work for an appointment. More female GP's to offer a Menopause session.'

'Given that every woman experiences this we need specialist provision, better education for menopause specialists, for all health care professionals, for workplaces and the general public. Support groups/ events are one way of sharing specialist advice and lived experience with many, somewhere to go (women's health hub) for a holistic range of treatments incl HRT. An up-to-date regional booklet, a menopause

section on the North East Making Every Contact Count website and comprehensive e-learning packages for specialists, health professionals, workplaces and public.

More awareness and access to information – 29%

'Easier access to support and advice from someone who can provide appropriate information, ensuring the individual feels confident with the information they are receiving'

'I think there needs to be more awareness of what's out there and how to access them'.

'More information in general for the public - female & male'.

More training – 19%

'GP in the practice specialising and undertaking more training'.

'More training for health professionals to enable more support to people going through menopause'.

'Front line staff need more specialised training and knowledge about this subject. I ended up paying for a private consultation which widens health inequalities'.

Assessments – 14%

'I feel it might be helpful for all women over the age of 45 to be assessed, if they request it, so that support can be offered to those who are struggling with perimenopause'.

'Well woman check at 40 and mention symptoms and signs so women know to come back and ask when they are affected'.

'All menopausal women should be surveyed and referred for treatment if necessary. The impact of menopause should be explained to women particularly if there are other underlying health conditions'.

Response from Nicole Madden, North East Commissioning Support (NECS)

The ICB will be reviewing all feedback from the completed surveys to identify key priority areas in conjunction with other commissioning teams working in adults' services.

Response from Elise Brady, Public Health Officer, South Tees Public Health

The results from the survey will inform our COM-B model looking at the Capabilities, Opportunities and Motivations of women attending or not attending their cervical screening appointments. We are involved in a behavioural insights project with CAJA (the behavioural insights company) with the aim of increasing the uptake rates of cervical screening. The insights from the survey will influence the interventions that we trial in selected GP practices before evaluating the impact and rolling out to all GP in South Tees.

Questions in the survey also covered menstrual problems, contraceptive counselling & provision of the full range of contraceptive methods, pessaries, cervical screening, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV screening and breast pain.

If you are interested in seeing the full results of the survey please get in touch via details on the back page.

Areas to consider for improvement

- **More training, awareness and knowledge for GP's for support, diagnosis and treatment e.g. impact of body identical vs synthetic progesterone.**
- **More general awareness and knowledge about menopause in the workplace and community.**
- **A greater awareness for younger people about perimenopause and menopause.**
- **More understanding and awareness, with and for, those communities who find it difficult to identify menopausal symptoms due to other health conditions or disabilities.**
- **More awareness of what local specialist support is available for women in the community of South Tees, e.g. women's health hubs.**
- **Information and awareness of how to manage peri menopause and post menopause symptoms.**
- **More awareness of alternative treatments to HRT.**
- **More awareness, information and support for those who experience premature menopause due to surgery and cancer treatments.**

Our Plans

Since the event, we have shared the evaluation feedback and survey responses with Jackie McBurnie, the new ICB Menopause Lead. As a result of this connection, we have identified areas that our film can support as follows:

- The event film will support the rolling out of a practitioner's toolkit for Practice Nurses to increase their knowledge about menopause to improve support offered locally and inform Primary Care practice.
- She will also upload our films onto the NENC ICB learning portal, Boost, for wider learning opportunities across the region.

We will continue to prioritise this work during 2024–2025 to increase the impact on improvements locally. It will also give us the opportunity to connect, influence and inform the relevant ICB and Healthwatch England's priority areas.

Our event films can be accessed [here](#) or scan this QR code.



Acknowledgments

- To the Keynote and community speakers as well as attendees of the HWST Menopause event.
- Members of the Perimenopause Support UK Facebook group that responded to the initial poll. Details can be found on their [website](#).
- Everyone who responded to the ICB / Public Health digital survey.

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