

Coping With Hot Flashes in Menopause

As a woman ages, her ovaries produce less and less estrogen and progesterone. When a woman hasn't had a period for 12 months—and when there's no other reason for this change, such as pregnancy or illness—she has reached menopause and can no longer become pregnant. For most women, this happens after age 45.

Menopause can affect women in many different ways. Sometimes, the only symptom is that periods stop happening and she otherwise feels fine. But some women experience other symptoms such as hot flashes, trouble sleeping, vaginal dryness and mood swings.

If you're undergoing menopause and are having hot flashes, here are some tips to deal with them.

Symptoms & Triggers

Hot flashes can occur at any time of day. At night, they're called night sweats and they often awaken women from sleep. Hot flashes are quite common—as many as three of four women going through menopause get them.

Hot flashes vary in frequency. You might experience multiple hot flashes each day or a few a week. Some last as long as 30 minutes, but most go away in just a few minutes. During a hot flash, you may experience:

- Feelings of pressure in your head when the hot flash starts
- Mild warmth to intense heat that spreads through your upper body and face
- A flushed appearance with red, blotchy skin on your face, neck and upper chest
- Rapid heartbeat
- Sweating, mostly on your upper body
- Feelings of chills as the hot flash subsides
- Less common symptoms such as weakness, fatigue, faintness and dizziness

Some women associate triggers with their hot flashes. Common triggers are feeling stressed, being in a hot place, eating hot or spicy foods or drinking alcohol or caffeine.

Women who smoke, are overweight or don't exercise are more

likely to have hot flashes. African American women also tend to be more susceptible to hot flashes.

Change Your Lifestyle

If your hot flashes aren't particularly bothersome, you don't need to treat them. And if they're mild, you can manage hot flashes with lifestyle changes. The first step is to avoid triggers. Another strategy is to keep cool—dress in layers so you can remove outer clothing if you get warm, sip a cold drink if you feel a hot flash coming on and wash hands in cold water during or after a hot flash.

If you experience night sweats, sleep in a cool room, use a fan and try using special sleepwear and pillowcases that pull moisture away from the skin. Put an ice pack under your pillow, and if you wake up with a night sweat, flip the pillow to the cool side.

Some women find that symptoms improve with relaxation. Yoga or meditation are popular choices. A breathing technique called paced respiration, which involves inhaling and exhaling at an even pace, also may help.

Smoking is linked to hot flashes, so quitting should be a priority. Quitting also decreases the risk for heart disease, stroke and cancer.

Other Treatments

Your PA might prescribe medications to help relieve hot flashes. Options include hormone therapy and other medications such as antidepressants, gabapentin and clonidine that aren't specifically indicated for hot flashes that can provide some relief.

Some women use alternative medicines to curb hot flashes, such as supplements containing black cohosh or phytoestrogens such as soy. There's no strong evidence that these supplements relieve hot flashes, but some women report success. Make sure your PA knows you're taking alternative remedies, because some can be harmful when used with other drugs. □

Sources include the National Institute on Aging, the Mayo Clinic, the Office on Women's Health and the North American Menopause Society.

Menopause or Getting Older?

Almost 75% of the 2,000 women who responded to a 2008 North American Menopause Society survey erroneously believed that aging, not menopause, most likely causes urinary incontinence.

Notes

Your physician assistant has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your PA.

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