



Schedule your Mammogram 603.595.5700

Information about Hot Flash Symptom Management

The Breast Care Center at St. Joseph Hospital

Where Care and Compassion Come Together

What are Hot Flashes?

Hot flashes are mostly caused by the hormonal changes of menopause, but can also be caused by lifestyle and medications. A diminished level of estrogen has a direct effect on the hypothalamus, the part of the brain responsible for controlling your appetite, sleep cycles, sex hormones, and body temperature. The drop in estrogen confuses the hypothalamus and makes it read "too hot." The brain responds to this report by broadcasting an all-out alert to the heat, blood vessels, and nervous system: "Get rid of the heat!" The message is delivered instantly. Your heart pumps faster, the blood vessels in your skin dilate to circulate more blood to radiate off the heat and your sweat glands release sweat to cool you off even more.

This heat-releasing mechanism is how your body keeps you from overheating in the summer, but when the process is triggered instead by a drop in estrogen, your brain's confused response can make you very uncomfortable.

Who Gets Them?

Eighty-five percent of the women in the United States experience hot flashes of some kind as they approach menopause, and for the first year or two after their periods stop. Some women may continue to have hot flashes for many more years. As time goes on, the intensity decreases. There is considerable variation in the time of onset, duration, frequency and the nature of hot flashes. An episode can last a few seconds or a few minutes, occasionally even an hour, but it can take another half-hour for you to feel yourself again. The most common times of onset are between 6 and 8 in the morning, and between 6 and 10 at night.

How Hot is Hot?

Most women have mild to moderate hot flashes, but about 10 – 15% experience such severe ones that they seek medical attention. Thin women may experience more compared to heavy or muscular women may because their bodies have less estrone, a naturally occurring estrogen produced by fat and muscle cells. Women who smoke may also suffer more severe hot flashes because smoking causes the blood vessels to lose some of their ability to radiate heat. The intensity of hot flashes accompanying treatment with tamoxifen and raloxifene eventually improves for many women after the first three to six months.

Beating the Heat

Hot flashes have a lot to do with the low levels of estrogen in your body, but other factors can also cause your temperature control to go out of whack. Instead of estrogen therapy, look at less drastic measures first because you should always begin with the least aggressive approach to treat your menopausal symptoms.

Avoiding Triggers

If you can identify the things that trigger your hot flashes, you've made the first step in getting the upper hand. Keep a record of when they occur and what you were eating or doing, and how you were feeling at the time. Many women find that stress tops the charts as a trigger. Was that hot flash in the boardroom a random hit, or were you feeling under pressure at the time? Was it a full day of pressure without a break? Solution: Ease the pressure. Give yourself more time to plan your work, to rehearse your presentation, to deliver your assignment, to arrive where you're going. If you are doing a series of presentations, give yourself a chance to relax and cool off between sessions. Plan your schedule so you avoid a meeting or making a decision when you're most likely to be in a sweat.

Other hot flash triggers:

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| • Alcohol | • Caffeine |
| • Diet Pills | • Spicy food |
| • Hot Food | • Hot Tubs |
| • Saunas | • Hot Showers |
| • Hot Beds | • Hot Rooms |
| • Hot Weather | • Smoking |

Hot Flash Survival Tips

- Dress in layers, so you can peel one off when you get warmer.
- Wear cotton, linen, or rayon instead of wool, synthetics, or silk.
- Avoid turtlenecks. Stick to open neck shirts.
- Keep ice water on hand that you can sip to cool down your insides.
- When possible, lower the thermostat, use air conditioning or a ceiling fan, or carry a hand-held battery-operated or paper fan.
- Wear cotton night clothes. When you perspire a lot they're easier to change than the sheets.
- Use cotton sheets, not synthetics.

- Get a bigger bed if you and your partner are on different heat planets but you still want to stay in close orbit.
- Take a cool shower before bed.
- Try a mild medication like Tylenol.
- Arrive at meetings early to get the coolest seat.
- Use your freezer liberally. A number of women say it helps to stick their heads in the freezer!

Lifestyle Changes to Alleviate Hot Flashes

Exercise: Increasing your level of activity (for example, taking the stairs instead of the elevator) can reduce hot flashes and have a positive impact on just about every other symptom attributed to menopause and growing older, including:

- Insomnia
- Mood Swings
- Eroded Self Image
- Loss of Libido
- Fatigue
- Elevated Cholesterol Levels
- Heart, Bone, and Muscle Health

Exercise also increases endorphin levels, increasing your threshold for pain.

Relaxation and Stress Reduction: It isn't unusual to have trouble dealing with stress. You may find that one of the following techniques will help you minimize the devastating effects of stress on your body:

- Relaxation Exercises
- Breathing Exercises
- Meditation
- Visualization
- Massage
- Hypnosis
- Yoga
- Biofeedback Techniques

Changing Your Diet: Over time, a low-fat diet helps some women with hot flashes. Loosing excess weight helps, but loosing too much weight, or being too thin, can worsen symptoms. As you consider other food changes, keep in mind that natural doesn't mean harmless. Herbal remedies and soy preparations may work because of their plant estrogens, but you can't assume that just because an estrogen comes from a plant it's a safe remedy.

Chinese Medicine: Chinese medicine has a long tradition of treating hot flashes. There are all kinds of hot flashes, and the Chinese have descriptions for all of them. Before treating you, a Chinese doctor takes a full history and performs a complete physical, with particular attention to your tongue and your pulse. He or she then determines whether you're suffering from a "hot" menopause or a "cold" menopause. If you have gone through a surgical or medical menopause, Chinese herbs are usually not considered strong enough to eliminate your menopausal hot flashes, but they can help.

Chinese medicine usually involves either acupuncture or herbology. Acupuncture is said to move your Xi (your inner wind, energy, or spirit). Some women find it helps hot flashes. Herbology is the art and science of cooking many different herbs together to make a tea customized to your

particular symptoms. Common to all Chinese herbal mixes is quai, thought to be a plant estrogen. More plant estrogens that women have found effective in treating hot flashes over the centuries can be found in ginseng, evening primrose oil, licorice root, red raspberry leaves, sarsaparilla, spearmint, damiana, motherwort, chasteberry (also known as Vitex), black cohosh, and wild yams.

Herbal remedies may be effective at reducing hot flashes but again, their relative safety for women who are at risk for breast cancer is not known. Avoiding plant estrogens or using them with great caution is best. Never try them without telling your doctor. Even leading Chinese medicine practitioners caution women not to self-treat with Chinese herbs.

Vitamins: Some women find that taking Vitamin E daily helps. Some accounts suggest that Periden-C (which contains antioxidants) provide relief.

Relieving Hot Flashes with Medications

If you have tried these lifestyle, nutritional, and alternative medicine recommendations, and they have not helped, you may feel compelled to go on to stronger remedies, available only through your physician. These include:

- Blood Pressure Lowering Medication
- Antidepressants
- Mild Sedatives

Blood Pressure Lowering Medication

Blood pressure lowering medications such as Clonidine (Catapres-TTS) and Aldomet, can lessen the severity and frequency of hot flashes. They modify the blood vessels' response to the brain's command to give off heat quickly. These drugs must be prescribed and adjusted carefully by your doctor.

Antidepressants

Low dose antidepressant medication may help forestall a hot flash by rebalancing or intercepting epinephrine and serotonin, the chemicals in the brain that transmit the hot flash alarm.

Effexor (venlafaxine) reduced hot flashes by about 50% in nearly 60% of women with breast cancer in a study done by Dr. Charles Loprinzi at the Mayo Clinic. Improvement was relatively quick: 80% of the eventual decrease in hot flashes occurred within the first week of taking the medication. Side effects, when they were noted, were mild. Extended release preparations are available. Paxil (paroxetine) is an alternative to Effexor and works in a similar way.

Mild Sedatives

Bellergal-S simmers down overactive chemical activity in the brain. Taken occasionally, once or twice a day, it can be quite safe and effective – but not with alcohol. (It contains belladonna, phenobarbital, and an ergotamine.) Phenobarbital can cause drowsiness, and if you use it regularly, you can develop a dependency for it.

If you have any questions or would like to speak with some one regarding Hot Flash Symptom Management, please call The Breast Care Center at 595-5700 or visit www.stjosephhospital.com.