

Hot Flashes

Hot Flashes, also called hot flushes, are feelings of great heat that suddenly rush through your upper body and face. The skin in these areas may get red, and you may sweat. You may be anxious or feel your heart racing. Hot flashes can happen at any time and last for a few seconds to a few minutes.

Hot flashes are often associated with menopause because that is the time in a female's life when the body stops producing estrogen. Hot flashes are one of the body's reactions to a decreasing level of estrogen. Cancer treatments – chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, and other medications such as opioids, tricyclic antidepressants, and steroids can also disrupt normal hormone levels, even in women who are not in menopause, and in men. So can surgery that removes, or seriously damages, an organ (ovaries, testicles) that makes these hormones.

Hormone replacement therapy can relieve hot flashes but if you have or had a hormone-dependent cancer, you probably will not be able to take HRT. This means most people with breast, prostate, uterine/endometrial, or ovarian cancers cannot take HRT.

What you can try on your own

- ✓ Try to identify what triggers your hot flashes and avoid them. Hot beverages, spicy food, alcohol, caffeine, cigarette or cigar smoke, tight clothing, warm temperatures, and certain medications are common triggers.
- ✓ Dress in layers during the day so you can remove a layer or two when a hot flash occurs. Wear loose clothes made of natural fibers that “breathe,” such as cotton.
- ✓ Use an electric fan to relieve the heat, or modify the temperature in the room.
- ✓ Exercise daily. Swim, walk, ride a bike, or go dancing.
- ✓ Treatments that help you cope with stress and anxiety may help manage hot flashes. Practice deep breathing exercises. Take slow, deep, full breaths at about 6-8 breaths per minute, expanding and contracting your abdomen as you breathe and release. Practice for 15 minutes, twice a day, or when you feel a hot flash coming on. Better yet, take a yoga or meditation class to learn classic breathing techniques.
- ✓ Naturally occurring substances called bioflavonoids may help with hot flashes. Bioflavonoids are plant pigments that give many fruits and flowers their color. Good sources of bioflavonoids include citrus fruits, berries, red onions, parsley, white and green tea, and dark chocolate containing 70% or more of cocoa.

Ask your doctor

Speak to your doctor before you take any “natural” or herbal remedies, or vitamins. Herbal remedies can cause side effects and drug interactions, just like prescription drugs. Soy products, black cohosh (sold under the name Remifin®) and red clover may reduce hot flashes, but they are natural estrogens and should not be taken by those who have a hormone-dependent cancer. Other herbals, such as kava, may affect the liver. Even Vitamin E has been shown in some studies to be unsafe for women with breast cancer. Always consult your doctor about any medications, supplements, or vitamins that you want to take.