

Hot Flashes

What are hot flashes?

Hot flashes are sudden feelings of flushing and heat that you may have when you are going through menopause. Hot flashes are one of the most common and earliest signs of menopause.

What is the cause?

The exact cause of hot flashes is not completely understood. It is believed that changes in estrogen levels may affect the part of the brain that controls the body's temperature. Blood vessels in the face, chest, and body dilate (widen) and make you feel warmer.

Hot flashes usually appear suddenly and without any warning. Sometimes they may be triggered by emotional stress, excitement, anxiety, alcohol, or some foods.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of a hot flash include:

- Redness and warmth on the skin of your face, neck, shoulders, or upper chest
- Pounding heartbeat
- Sweating followed by a slight chill

Hot flashes may last a few seconds or as long as 30 minutes. Most last no more than 2 or 3 minutes. Hot flashes can be most troublesome when they happen at night and interrupt your sleep.

How are they diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you.

How are they treated?

If your hot flashes are mild and infrequent, use a fan or sip a glass of cool water or juice when you start having a hot flash.

If your hot flashes are frequent and severe and keep you from sleeping at night, your healthcare provider may suggest hormone therapy. This treatment involves taking the hormones estrogen and progesterone if you still have your uterus. You may take estrogen without progesterone if you no longer have your uterus. The hormones can be prescribed as pills that you swallow, skin patches, creams, vaginal suppositories, vaginal rings, shots, or pellets placed under the skin. Depending on your age, treatment with estrogen and progesterone may increase the risk for heart disease. It may also increase your risk for stroke, breast cancer, blood clots, some gallbladder problems, and possibly dementia. Also, estrogen taken without progesterone increases the risk of uterine cancer if you still have

your uterus. Discuss the risks and benefits of hormone therapy with your healthcare provider.

Other medicines your provider may prescribe are Catapres (clonidine) or Bellergal, a medicine that contains phenobarbital.

Be careful with nonprescription and herbal remedies because some may have dangerous side effects. Always discuss any over-the-counter and herbal remedies with your healthcare provider.

Talk to your healthcare provider about what might be the best treatment for you.

How long will the hot flashes last?

You may start having hot flashes before you stop having menstrual periods. Hot flashes may stop after a few months, or you may keep having them for as long as 5 years or more.

How can I take care of myself?

Try to keep cool, both physically and emotionally.

- Keep as cool as you can in hot weather or in warm rooms. Wear light, cotton clothing and dress in loose layers. Keep your house cool and use lightweight blankets at night.
- Avoid hot, spicy foods.
- Don't drink or eat a lot of red wine, chocolate, or aged cheeses. These foods contain a chemical that can affect your body's thermostat and trigger a hot flash.
- Avoid smoking, alcohol, and caffeine.
- Exercise regularly, according to your healthcare provider's recommendation.
- Use relaxation techniques, such as breathing exercises, to help relieve stress.

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