



for your best health

HOT FLASHES: DON'T SWEAT IT

Ask Your Pharmacist

If you haven't been educated about hot flashes, a sudden onset can be frightening. Imagine turning red in the face and become soaking wet without warning, especially during a social function or a board meeting. Unfortunately, women all over the world are dealing with these annoying and embarrassing incidences every day. Hot flashes are caused by the hormonal shift defined by the end of menstrual periods and affect millions of women. They may also be caused by certain hormone-related treatments for cancer or other medical problems.

According to the Mayo Clinic, 75% of menopausal and post menopausal women experience hot flashes. While most women experience them in the first year or two after their periods stop, some women continue to have them for many more years - fortunately, with decreasing levels of intensity as time goes on. Lasting from 30 seconds to several minutes, hot flashes may strike more than a dozen times a day. The quicker you go through the changeover from regular periods to the cessation of your period, the more pronounced your hot flashes will be. And hot flashes can be particularly severe after surgical menopause or a chemotherapy-induced medical menopause.

There are a number of theories and explanations which attempt to decipher what cause hot flashes. Today, it is widely believed that they are caused by diminished levels of estrogen which affects the hypothalamus. This is the part of the brain which controls body temperature, sex hormones, sleep cycles, and appetite. The hypothalamus is considered the body's thermostat and is a key part of the heat-releasing mechanism designed to keep our bodies from overheating in the summer.

It is thought that a drop in estrogen levels causes the hypothalamus to think that the body is too hot. Just as a thermostat would, it signals the brain and consequently the nervous system, heart, and other organs to cool down. The components of the nervous system- epinephrine, norepinephrine, prostaglandin, and serotonin are responsible for transmitting this message. As soon as the message is received, the heart begins to pump faster, the blood vessels in the skin dilate so as to circulate larger quantities of blood, inducing the sweat glands to release sweat in order to

assist in cooling down the body.

ALLEVIATING HOT FLASHES THE HOLISTIC WAY

A range of approaches can help in order to mitigate the severity and onset of hot flashes. The right approach for you depends on how much they bother you and whether you have particular risk factors.

Natural and holistic remedies are often a good starting point. Because hot flashes are affected by the levels of estrogen and progesterone, keeping these natural hormones steady will likely ease incidences. A recent study at St. Luke's Hospital in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, found that 83% of women who were administered transdermal progesterone reported either a reduction in the frequency and/or severity of their hot flash incidents. On the other hand, new studies have shown that medications or overly aggressive approaches are not always helpful when it comes to dealing with hot flashes. Estrogen therapy, for example, is questionable because of its adverse effects on women who have a history of breast cancer. Therefore, natural approaches are often perceived as the safest bet in dealing with hot flashes.

The good news is that these natural approaches are often simplistic and easy to implement into your everyday routine. For example, identifying triggers that cause an onset of hot flashes will allow you to better deal with the annoying sweats. You can identify triggers by making note of your surroundings - what were you doing, eating, your mood, etc. - when an incident of hot flashes occurs. Once you have identified your trigger(s), put yourself in situations that either avoid the trigger or alleviates its effect on you. For example, many women single out stress as their primary trigger, therefore these women would benefit from alleviating pressures, taking time to relax, and implementing time-management skills.

NUTRITIONAL & LIFESTYLE CONSIDERATIONS

Research suggests that soy may have some benefit for reducing hot flashes and other symptoms of menopause. Soy has a good reputation when it comes to women's health, one reason being that Japanese women who have a soy-rich diet (about 50 to 100 milligrams of isoflavones a day) report fewer and milder hot flashes than American women. Foods that contain soy include tofu, tempeh, miso, soy milk, whole soybeans, texturized vegetable protein, and soy powder.

Visit our pharmacy or website to learn more about Controlling Hot Flashes.

HOT FLASHES (continued)

Black cohosh often provides effective relief of hot flashes, as well as other symptoms of menopause including headaches, heart palpitations, and anxiety. A German study of over 600 women found more than 80% of hot flashes and other symptoms improved within 8 weeks of beginning treatment with Black cohosh.

Natural progesterone cream available OTC, in compounded prescriptions, provides relief for hot flashes and other symptoms of menopause for many women.

Taking 400 IU to 800 IU of Vitamin E daily significantly reduces the occurrence and severity of hot flashes and night sweats during menopause or perimenopause, and provides an additional benefit of strengthening the immune system and protecting the heart.

THEORETICALLY...

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Exercise is a key element of any program toward optimum health. Studies demonstrate that regular exercise for as little as 3.5 hours per week also lowers the frequency and severity of hot flashes. Exercise at least 30 minutes every day. You can walk, run, ride a bicycle, or do another activity.

Maintaining your body temperature through external sources can mitigate hot flash triggers. Fans, air conditioning, and even keeping the window open will all help you to keep your cool. Additionally, dressing appropriately, such as in layers, can help you to prevent the onset of hot flashes.

Don't forget to identify your individual triggers. Common triggers for women include tobacco, caffeine, alcohol, spicy foods, and even chocolate!

Relaxation is key. Implement stress-reduction and relaxation techniques in your daily life. A good tip is utilizing breathing exercises. Make sure you take deep breaths throughout the day, as this can prevent the onset of an incident or help mitigate hot flashes that have already begun. Yoga, meditation, and massage may also improve both your overall health and the severity and/or frequency of hot flashes.

MEDICATIONS AND NON-NATURAL APPROACHES

Despite implementing natural and holistic approaches, some women may still suffer from frequent and severe hot flashes. These women can consider more aggressive approaches, including medication. It is vital, however, that you talk to your doctor and pharmacist about your options when considering this route.

Hormone therapy can provide effective relief, but studies have associated this approach with an increased risk of stroke or breast cancer. Therefore, women undergoing hormone therapy should consider taking the lowest dose possible for the shortest amount of time possible.

Gabapentin (Neurontin) is a seizure medication commonly used in the treatment of migraines. Studies depict that using Gabapentin may decrease hot flash incidents by two a day. Side effects were slight and included minimal weight gain and dizziness.

Clonidine, used to treat high blood pressure either in pill or patch form, resulted in one fewer hot flash per day for users. Common side effects included dry mouth, constipation, dizziness, and drowsiness.

Low doses of *antidepressants* such as venlafaxine (Effexor), paroxetine (Paxil), and fluoxetine (Prozac) were shown to reduce by one the daily number of hot flashes when compared to the placebo. Possible side effects included dizziness, nausea, or sexual dysfunction.