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Hot Flash Information

What is a hot flash?

Hot flashes are sudden sensations of flushing and heat that some women feel when they are going through menopause. They are one of the most common and earliest signs of menopause.

How do they occur?

The cause of hot flashes is not completely understood, but hot flashes are a result of a decrease in the female hormone estrogen. It is believed that estrogen production affects the part of the brain that controls the body's temperature. Hot flashes usually appear suddenly and without any warning, although 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, and upper chest
- pounding heartbeat
- Sweating followed by a slight chill.

For most women, hot flashes are mild and infrequent, but some women have them many times a day or night. Sometimes hot flashes disturb sleep or cause heavy sweating.

How are they diagnosed?

Your doctor examines you and talks with you about your symptoms.

What is the treatment?

If your hot flashes are mild and infrequent, use a fan, sip a glass of cool water or juice, or imagine a cool, comfortable place when a hot flash begins. Some over-the-counter remedies are said to provide some relief of hot flashes. You may want to discuss them with your health care provider.

If your hot flashes are frequent and severe, and if you have night sweats severe enough to keep you from sleeping, your doctor may prescribe hormone therapy (estrogen with or without progestin). The hormones can be prescribed as pills that you swallow or as patches you put on your skin.

How long will the hot flashes last?

A hot flash generally lasts from a few seconds to 5 minutes, but it may last up to a half hour. Hot flashes may begin before you have stopped having your menstrual periods. They may stop after a few months or continue for 5 years or longer.

How can I take care of myself?

Try to keep cool, both physically and emotionally. If possible, avoid very hot or spicy foods and beverages, alcohol, and emotional upsets. Keep as cool as you can in hot weather or in warm rooms.

What can be done to help prevent hot flashes?

- Wear clothing made of cotton or other natural fibers and dress in loose layers.
- Keep your house cool and use lightweight blankets at night.
- Limit your intake of red wine, chocolate, and aged cheeses, which contain a chemical that can affect your body's thermostat and trigger a hot flash
- Avoid smoking, caffeine, and excessive alcohol intake. These can make you irritable, which can make hot flashes worse.