

Menopausal symptoms and breast cancer



This factsheet is for women who are experiencing menopausal symptoms after breast cancer treatment.

Introduction

The menopause is a natural and inevitable event for all women. The average age at which a natural menopause occurs in women in the UK is 51 years, with symptoms usually spanning a period of several years. However, treatment some women receive for breast cancer can cause an earlier menopause and/or significant menopausal symptoms.

Some breast cancers (known as oestrogen receptor positive or ER positive breast cancers) are stimulated to grow by the hormone oestrogen. Many breast cancer treatments are therefore designed to reduce oestrogen levels or block the action of oestrogen, which can cause menopausal symptoms. Menopausal symptoms can arise as a result of hormone therapy treatment or ovarian ablation or suppression (stopping the ovaries working either permanently or temporarily) in ER positive women.

Women having chemotherapy may have an earlier, more sudden

menopause as a result of treatment. Symptoms are often more intense than when the menopause occurs naturally, whether they are oestrogen receptor positive or not. If symptoms only stop temporarily during chemotherapy, menopausal symptoms may still be experienced for some of the more common menopausal symptoms include hot flushes, night sweats, palpitations, mood changes, joint aches and pains and vaginal dryness. You may put on weight, with the weight being more concentrated around the waist. More rarely, some women experience a crawling sensation under the skin, usually on the chest and stomach. You may find that you become anxious or irritable or have problems with memory or concentration. The changes you notice in your body may be gradual but for some women changes like hot flushes can start suddenly.

This factsheet covers a range of treatment options, including complementary therapies and

specifically prescribed drugs. For most people, flushes will improve over time and become less severe. The effectiveness of some of the treatments (particularly the long-prescription therapies) are not supported by scientific evidence, but many women have found them useful. However, it is also important to consider the safety of non-prescription therapies.

Different treatments work for different women and it can be a case of trial and error until you find something suitable. If you try something new, talk to your specialist or breast care nurse. Different treatments work for different women and it can be a case of trial and error until you find something suitable. If you try something new, talk to your specialist or breast care nurse.

Some women become aware of their heartbeat racing (palpitations) or develop a sense of anxiety. Many women also get flushes at night, which can lead to disturbed sleep and waking in a cold, wet and needing to change the bed linen. This can be very disruptive, especially if you share a bed with a partner. You may be worried about disturbing your partner. Disturbed sleep can result in forgetfulness, irritability and a lack of concentration during the following day.

Hot flushes

Hot flushes are the most commonly reported menopausal symptom associated with breast cancer treatment. They can vary greatly from being a mild sensation of warming which just affects the face or the whole of the upper body, to night sweats which are an extremely unpleasant feeling affecting the entire body and causing drenching perspiration.

You may consider hot flushes to be a nuisance or uncomfortable but some women find flushes can have a dramatic impact on the way they feel about themselves. This can have a knock-on effect on their social life, working life and relationships.

What can you do to help flushes?

Tips for dealing with hot flushes

You might feel that you should put up with hot flushes because you have been treated for breast cancer, but they can be very distressing. You may think that you shouldn't bother anyone about them, but it is worth speaking to your specialist team or GP (local doctor) as there may be treatments that can help. If you attend a support group, talking to other women who are having hot flushes can give you the opportunity to share experiences and get advice on ways of dealing with them. You may wish to use the discussion forums on the Breast Cancer Care website to gain support and tips from other women who have experienced these side effects.

It may be useful to keep a note of when you experience hot flushes. This can help you to identify any patterns to them or if anything triggers them that you might be able to avoid. If you know when to expect hot flushes you can be better prepared for them.

The following tips have been recommended by other women and may help you cope better with flushes and night sweats.

Wear cotton or silk clothing as these fabrics absorb moisture and still provide warmth after a flush over.

Wear layers of clothing that can be taken off or put on as your temperature changes.

Use layers of bedclothes (natural fabrics are better) that you can remove or replace as required. If you are a couple sharing the same bed, using single bedclothes on each side can help you both stay comfortable.

Put a cool gel pack under your pillow at night so that you can put the pillow over for a cooling effect when you need to. Many women have found a pillow that stays cool such as a Chillow, useful.

Use water sprays or moist wipes to help lower your skin temperature. You could try adding

an aromatherapy oil to the spray, nurse for more information such as peppermint which has about this. cooling properties or lavender which has a relaxing effect.

Relaxation

Use an electric fan to help lower your skin temperature or a desk fan while at work if you can. Many women find that reducing stress makes their symptoms less severe. This might just mean

If you are not sleeping well, try to find time to have a rest during the day. Learning to become calmer, which may be achieved by using controlled breathing techniques

Avoid warm, stuffy rooms as they can make flushes worse. might involve doing things to reduce stress, such as relaxation

Regular, gentle exercise, such as going for a walk, may help reduce your symptoms. work demands. Being anxious about hot flushes can make your symptoms worse.

Stopping smoking may help, as smoking increases the rate at which the body uses oestrogen, which means there is less oestrogen in the body. Knowing what to expect and being prepared can help you feel more control and reduce your anxiety

If you have hot flushes from tamoxifen, it may help to split the dose (for example taking 10 mg in the morning and 10 mg at night). Hot flushes usually come and go over short periods, so try to and wait for the sensation to When you feel a hot flush coming on, you may find it helps to isolate yourself in a cool place. It may help to know that although hot flushes are uncomfortable for other people are unlikely to notice them happening.

Complementary therapies

Some women find complementary therapies help with relaxation and relieve hot flushes. There are many to choose from, including homeopathy, acupuncture, reflexology, massage, aromatherapy, hypnotherapy and meditation.

Acupuncture has been shown to be effective for some women, although the evidence for its use is inconsistent. Massage with aromatherapy oils such as sage or chamomile may also help improve hot flushes, but again there is no evidence to support this.

If you want to try a complementary approach you should discuss this with your specialist team first. It is advisable to go to a qualified practitioner. For further information, see Useful addresses at the end of this factsheet or our **Complementary therapies** booklet.

Diet

Food can be one of the triggers for hot flushes and some women find that certain things, such as spicy food, caffeine or alcohol, have this effect. You will need to work out for yourself what your triggers are. Some women find that eating frequent small meals rather than larger ones is helpful. Drinking water frequently has been reported as helpful for some women, as it temporarily lowers your body temperature and may reduce the number of flushes. Reducing your alcohol intake may also help. If you are overweight, losing weight may reduce your symptoms.

Maintaining long-term health, through regular exercise and stopping smoking may also help.

Vitamin E

A few women report that taking vitamin E tablets helps to reduce the number of hot flushes they have, although some trials have shown vitamin E has no more benefit than a placebo (a dummy pill) and in large doses vitamin

toxic. Check with your GP or health food shops. It is also possible to buy supplements of cancer specialist before you start taking any supplements and never take more than the recommended dose.

Evening primrose oil

Some women have found taking evening primrose oil helpful, but, as with vitamin E, studies have shown it to have no more benefit than a placebo and there is currently no evidence to support its use for reducing or preventing hot flushes.

Phytoestrogens (plant oestrogens)

Phytoestrogens are chemicals found in plant foods. There is a variety of them, all with different actions, although in general they mimic the effect of oestrogen in the body. It is unclear if they help to reduce hot flushes. Phytoestrogens are found in many fruits, vegetables and grains. There are high quantities of them in foods such as soya beans and linseed. You can buy phytoestrogen-rich foods from

isoflavones.

There has been a lot of research to examine the use of soy protein and other phytoestrogens to reduce hot flushes, but, as the results are inconsistent regarding their safety and effectiveness. It is currently uncertain what effect phytoestrogens have on the body when they are taken in greater amounts than found in a normal diet. It is also not clear whether the amount of plant oestrogen in your body has any effect on the risk of your cancer coming back.

As with herbal remedies, phytoestrogens are classified as foodstuffs and so are not covered by the regulations and clinical trials (see below).

Herbal remedies

Some women find herbal remedies to be an effective way of reducing hot flushes. However, opinion is divided on whether they are suitable and safe for use, or if they have any more effect than a placebo. They are classed as foodstuffs, which means they don't come under the same regulations as other drugs. This means they don't go through thorough clinical trials before being put on the market and their side effects or interaction with other drugs or treatments (e.g. tamoxifen or aromatase inhibitors) may not be known.

Some herbal remedies, such as red clover, may help to reduce hot flushes because they contain phytoestrogens, but as indicated above their safety and how effective they are has yet to be established in women who have been treated for breast cancer. Wild yam, ginseng and fennel contain a mixture of many hormone-like substances, but the way in which they work is not entirely clear. Black

cohoosh does not appear to have any hormonal actions although evidence is unclear, and the number of studies have shown inconsistent findings regarding effectiveness. This remedy has also been reported to give side effects such as dizziness, headaches or stomach upsets. There may also be a risk of liver problems in women who already have pre-existing liver disease.

It is important to consult a registered herbalist and discuss any herbal supplements with your cancer specialist or breast care nurse before taking them, particularly if you are having hormone treatment such as tamoxifen or aromatase inhibitors.

Prescribed drug therapies

The following drugs have all been shown to help relieve hot flashes and would need to be prescribed by a doctor.

Low-dose progesterone

Progesterone in low doses can be effective in relieving hot flashes, although there is no evidence it is effective in reducing symptoms in the long term. Many doctors are hesitant to give any hormones to women who have had breast cancer and for this reason they are not often prescribed in women who have had a breast cancer diagnosis.

These drugs include megestrol (Megace), medroxyprogesterone (Provera) and norethisterone (Primolut N, Utovlan). Side effects from these drugs can include weight gain, abdominal bloating and breast tenderness. You may also experience vaginal bleeding one or two weeks after progesterone treatment is stopped as hormones return to their normal levels.

Clonidine (Dixarit, Catapres)

Clonidine can be effective in women in reducing both the frequency and the intensity of flushes but its effects may wear over time. As with all drugs, clonidine can have side effects including a dry mouth, headache, constipation and drowsiness.

Anti-depressant drugs

The anti-depressant drug venlafaxine (Effexor) has been shown in studies to have a good effect in reducing flushes in women, but may have unpleasant side effects and its effect may wear off over time. It is prescribed in a different dose to help with hot flushes than when prescribed for depression, and is not expected to have anti-depressant effects. Side effects might include nausea, weight gain, diarrhoea, sleepiness and dizziness. The anti-depressant drugs fluoxetine (Prozac) and paroxetine (Seroxat), are also sometimes prescribed to help reduce hot flushes, and have similar side-effects to venlaf

However, some studies suggest that using these drugs may interfere with the way that tamoxifen works, making it less effective. Some studies report that HRT causes cancer to come back and others that it doesn't, so the use of HRT is still unclear.

Gabapentin (Neurontin)

Some women have found an anti-epilepsy drug, gabapentin, helpful in reducing the severity of hot flashes. As with all drugs, gabapentin can have side effects, including fatigue, sleep disturbance and anxiety. A small number of women experience severe menopausal symptoms that significantly affect their quality of life and that do not respond to other treatments or complementary therapies. In these cases HRT may be prescribed because the benefits are likely to outweigh any possible risk. This would be done only once your cancer specialist has discussed the risks and benefits with you in order to decide whether it is appropriate. A full dose of HRT may not be necessary to reduce hot flashes, so it would be possible to try using smaller amounts.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

HRT replaces hormones that are no longer being produced by the ovaries and is a very effective way of relieving menopausal symptoms. It can also help to protect against long-term side effects of the menopause such as osteoporosis. However, HRT is not usually offered to women who have had breast cancer as there is still uncertainty if HRT increases the risk of breast cancer recurring.

Vaginal dryness

Low oestrogen levels can result in vaginal dryness and irritation. Wearing loose-fitting cotton

underwear and avoiding tight-fitting trousers can help, as this is less likely to irritate the vaginal area.

Vaginal moisturisers such as Replens MD or Senselle (available from chemists and on prescription) may be used every few days. If you experience discomfort during sexual intercourse it may be helpful to apply water-based lubricants such as KY jelly, Astroglide,

Pasante TLC or Sylk. These products don't generally cause vaginal irritation and are fine to use with condoms.

Some women find that spermicide gel or even natural yogurt can help make intercourse more comfortable. If you can get past the initial dryness, then intercourse itself helps to stimulate the blood flow to the vagina and will help maintain its suppleness and elasticity.

Vaginal dryness and irritation also be caused by infection, so visit your GP if you are experiencing problems so they can rule this out.

Oestrogen pessaries and creams such as Ortho-Gynest and the vaginal ring, Estrin, act locally on the vaginal tissues and may relieve dryness effectively. The exact amount of oestrogen absorbed into the rest of the body is not fully known, but it is thought to be safe in the short term, for example three months.

The vaginal tablet, Vagifem, can also cause a small increase in level of oestrogen in your body. It is advisable to discuss the use of these locally acting oestrogen with your cancer specialist.

Decreased sex drive

People with breast cancer may lose interest in sex for many reasons. It may be a result of the diagnosis itself, treatment or side effects, or concerns with body image. If this is a problem for you, talk to your GP, specialist or breast care nurse, as there are ways of helping you deal with these issues.

Menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats as well as a decreased sex drive can affect new and existing relationships and your sex life. You may find it difficult to start a new relationship at this time. You can find more information on vaginal dryness, decreased sex drive and relationships in our booklets

Sexuality, intimacy and breast cancer.

Mood changes

The brain can be affected by a reduction in oestrogen levels, which can result in lack of concentration, forgetfulness and irritability. You may find that you are experiencing extreme mood changes, from feeling positive and happy one day to miserable and low the next. These can happen unexpectedly and for no apparent reason.

Relaxation classes, meditation, yoga and other similar activities can be useful ways of controlling changes. These won't be appropriate for everyone, but it's worth trying a few to see if they work for you. Talking about your feelings can be helpful and you may find it useful to discuss these with other women who are going through a similar experience. You can call our helpline for information on our Peer support service or visit the discussion forums on our website. There may also be a breast cancer support group in your area, your breast care nurse will be able to tell you where there is.

Further support

Any menopausal problems that you are having are in addition to the experience of cancer itself, the treatment and its side effects. Flushes may be the one thing that is stopping you gaining some normality and for some women can be a constant reminder of their breast cancer experience. For others, having this problem on top of everything else makes them feel very low. If you find that you are unable to cope or that you keep feeling down, try talking with your GP or breast care nurse. They may be able to refer you to a professional counsellor or therapist who can help. You may also be referred to a specialist menopause clinic if there is one in your area, where you can get further advice and information about coping with menopausal symptoms.

Further help from Breast Cancer Care

For further medical information, emotional support, and details of our services, call our helpline on **0808 800 6000** (for Typetalk prefix **18001**).

Breast Cancer Care's website has an email enquiries service call Ask the nurse, along with forums and live chat sessions where you can share your views with people in a similar situation. For more information about these services and other online support, visit **www.breastcancercare.org.uk**

We run courses and activities for people with breast cancer, which aim to provide information and support and give people the chance to meet others in a similar situation.

For more information about the events, call our helpline or contact your nearest Breast Cancer Care centre details on the reverse.

Breast Cancer Care also has a wide range of publications to

you from diagnosis to living after treatment. You can download and order our publications at www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call our helpline on 0800 800 6000 for a printed order form.

Other organisations

British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA)

PO Box 5122, Bournemouth BH8 0WG Tel: 0845 345 5977
Email: office@bcma.co.uk
Website: www.bcma.co.uk

Umbrella organisation. Produces a guide and a code of conduct for practitioners, and a holds a register of practitioners.

British Holistic Medical Association

PO Box 371, Bridgewater, Somerset TA6 9BG
Tel: 01278 722000
Email: admin@bhma.org
Website: www.bhma.org

Provides information, produces self-help tapes, booklets and a quarterly magazine.

British Homeopathic Association

Hahnemann House, 29 Park Street West, Luton LU1 3BE Tel: 0870 444 3950 Email: info@trusthomeopathy.org
Website: www.trusthomeopathy.org

Provides information and a directory of homeopaths. Produces a booklet called How to get Homeopathic Treatment on the NHS and a quarterly magazine.

British Medical Acupuncture Society

BMAS House, 3 Winington Court, Northwich CW9 6AQ
Telephone: 01606 786782
Email: admin@medical-acupuncture.org.uk
Website: www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk

Provides acupuncture information and news, and a list of members who are all registered medical practitioners.

British Menopause Society (BMS)

4-6 Eton Place, Marlow SL7 2QA
Telephone: 01628 890199
Email: admin@thebms.org.uk
Website: www.thebms.org.uk

The BMS is a registered charity dedicated to increasing awareness of post-menopausal healthcare issues and promoting optimal management through conferences, roadshows and publications (see further reading).

The Daisy Network

PO Box 183, Rossendale BB4 6WZ
Recorded helpline: 0845 122 8616
Email: daisy@daisynetwork.org.uk
Website: www.daisynetwork.org.uk

Voluntary support group for women who experience a premature menopause, including information exchange and informal telephone support by members.

Institute for Complementary and Natural Medicine

Can-Mezzanine, 32-36 Loman Street, London SE1 0EH

Tel: 020 7922 7980

Email: info@icnm.org.uk

Website: www.i-c-m.org.uk

Provides information, training and a register of professional practitioners.

The Menopause Exchange

PO Box 250, Bushey WD23 1ZS

Tel: 020 8420 7245

The Menopause Exchange is a quarterly newsletter for anyone interested in the menopause and midlife issues. It specialises in independent information about HRT, complementary therapies, nutrition, osteoporosis. Annual subscription starts at £18.

National Institute of Medical Herbalists

Elm House, 54 Mary Arches Street, Exeter EX4 3BA

Tel: 01392 426022

Email: info@nimh.org.uk

Website: www.nimh.org.uk

Produces information, training and a register of qualified medical herbalists.

Natural Health Advisory Service

PO Box 117, Rottingdean, Brighton,
East Sussex BN51 9BG
Tel: 01273 609699

Email:

enquiries@naturalhealthas.com

Website: www.naturalhealthas.com

Offers specific dietary, nutritional and exercise advice for women with pre-menstrual syndrome, menopausal symptoms, prevention of osteoporosis and other hormone-related problems.

on finding complementary therapists and services in your area.

The Society of Homeopaths

11 Brookfield, Duncan Close,
Moulton Park, Northampton NN3
6Wilton, 0845 450 6611

Email: info@homeopathy-soh.org

Website: www.homeopathy-soh.org

Provides information leaflets, a register of members and a newsletter.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care

Chapel Pill Lane, Pill, Bristol BS20
0HH

Helpline: 0845 123 2310 (Mon-Fri
9.30am-5pm)

Email: helpline@pennybrohn.org

Website:

www.pennybrohncancercare.org

Offers two and five day holistic courses (led by doctors and therapists) for cancer patients which include counselling, relaxation, visualisation, meditation, art and music therapy, healing and dietary advice. Helpline offers emotional support, and information

Women's Health Concern

4-6 Eton Place, Marlow,
Buckinghamshire SL7 2QA

Tel: 0845 123 2319 (Mon-Fri 10
1pm) Email:

info@womens-health-concern.org

Website:

www.womens-health-concern.org

Specialist nurses will answer queries about the menopause and a wide variety of gynaecological and sexual health conditions.

Central Office

Breast Cancer Care

5-13 Great Suffolk Street

London SE1 0NS

Telephone 0845 092 0800

Fax 0845 092 0820

Email info@breastcancercare.org.uk

Centres

London and the South East of England

Telephone 0845 077 1895

Email src@breastcancercare.org.uk

Wales, South West and Central England

Telephone 0845 077 1894

Email cym@breastcancercare.org.uk

East Midlands and the North of England

Telephone 0845 077 1893

Email nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk

Scotland and Northern Ireland

Telephone 0845 077 1892

Email sco@breastcancercare.org.uk

About Breast Cancer Care

Breast Cancer Care is here for anyone affected by breast cancer. We bring people together, provide information and support, and campaign for improved standards of care. We use our understanding of people's experience of breast cancer and our clinical expertise in everything we do. Visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call our free helpline on **0808 800 6000**. Calls may be monitored for training purposes.

Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Breast Cancer Care.

Donations from the public make it possible for us to provide publications like this one free to people affected by breast cancer.

If you would like to make a donation, please send your cheque to: Breast Cancer Care, RRKZ-ARZY-YCKG, 5-13 Great Suffolk Street, London SE1 0NS. Or donate via our website at www.breastcancercare.org.uk