

# Managing hot flushes

Advice for women who are receiving  
hormonal therapy for breast cancer



This advice is for women who are receiving hormonal therapy for breast cancer. Hot flushes are one possible side effect of hormonal therapy.



## Introduction

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Hormonal (or 'endocrine') therapy is the name given to any treatment that affects either the amount or the activity of particular hormones within the body. In some kinds of breast cancer (hormone receptor-positive breast cancer) the hormone oestrogen may actually help the cancer to grow or recur. Women with this kind of cancer are often prescribed hormonal therapies such as tamoxifen, anastrozole (Arimidex®), letrozole (Femara®) or exemestane (Aromasin®) to either reduce the amount or the activity of oestrogen, which decreases the chance of their cancer returning. Unfortunately, because of their 'anti-oestrogen' effects, these treatments can also increase a woman's chances of experiencing menopausal symptoms.

The most common of these symptoms is hot flushing. 'Hot flushes' can vary in severity, from very mild to very severe. Mild flushes are often nothing more than a short-lived and easily tolerated nuisance, requiring little or no treatment, while more severe flushing can be a very distressing, disruptive and/or embarrassing problem.

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This leaflet briefly explains what hot flushes are, why they occur more often amongst women receiving hormonal therapy for breast cancer and – most importantly – what women can do to help prevent hot flushes and/or minimise their impact.



## Things you can do to help prevent or minimise hot flushes

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### Make simple lifestyle changes

- Try to stay cool during the day and also while sleeping.
- Keep fit and stay active.
- Pace your breathing during a hot flush.
- Note down when you have hot flushes. (Note: This can help to identify patterns in when they occur or specific triggers that you may be able to avoid.)

### Consult your doctor

- Ask your doctor for advice about what lifestyle changes might work best for you. (Note: Many women find that lifestyle changes alone provide sufficient relief from hot flushes.)
- Ask your doctor for advice about other possible treatment options (see overleaf).
- Work with your doctor to devise a treatment strategy that best suits your individual needs and preferences.



## What are hot flushes?

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- ▶ A 'hot flush' is a sudden feeling of heat, most commonly in the face, neck and/or chest, which may be accompanied by reddening of the skin.
- ▶ Hot flushes can occur during the day or night, they can last a few seconds or several hours and they can also occur with varying regularity and/or severity.
- ▶ Hot flushes may be accompanied by heavy sweating, a sensation of rapid heart beat (palpitations), anxiety or irritability and are sometimes followed by a chill. They may also interrupt sleep, leading to increased tiredness and fatigue.
- ▶ Hot flushes are sometimes also referred to as 'hot flashes' or 'vasomotor symptoms'.



## What causes hot flushes?

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- The cause of hot flushes is not fully understood, but it appears that a decline in the body's oestrogen level (e.g. due to menopause and/or hormonal therapy) may lead to changes in the part of the brain that regulates the body's temperature.
- Oestrogen is a female sex hormone, produced mainly by the ovaries; healthy women commonly experience hot flushes at the time of menopause, when their ovaries stop functioning and there is a sudden drop in oestrogen – such flushes are normal and can continue for up to two or three years (or even longer in some cases).
- Menopause is not the only possible cause of hot flushes; other possible causes include cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and hormonal therapy, thyroid disease and infection.
- Hormonal treatments for breast cancer may increase the frequency and/or severity of hot flushes by reducing the level and/or activity of oestrogen in the body and, in turn, interfering with processes that regulate body temperature.



## How common are hot flushes?

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- ▶ Hot flushes affect two-thirds of postmenopausal women, and 10–20% of all postmenopausal women find them nearly intolerable.
- ▶ Hot flushes may be more frequent and more severe in breast cancer patients than in women experiencing natural menopause.
- ▶ Up to 90% of patients report hot flushes after having their ovaries removed.





## Managing hot flushes: Possible treatment options for women who are receiving hormonal therapy for breast cancer

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### Lifestyle changes are important

Many women find that they only need to make a few simple lifestyle changes to effectively prevent or relieve hot flushes. Some of the things you can do are listed below. Your doctor or clinic nurse will be able to offer more suggestions.

### Avoid potential triggers

One of the easiest things you can do to help prevent or minimise hot flushes is avoid known triggers.

Things that have the potential to trigger a hot flush include:

- ▶ Heavy clothing
- ▶ Overheating
- ▶ Hot drinks
- ▶ Caffeine
- ▶ Stress
- ▶ Hot weather
- ▶ Use of a hair dryer
- ▶ Spicy foods
- ▶ Alcohol
- ▶ Smoking

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### **Try to stay cool, day and night**

- Wear loose, cool clothing (e.g. cotton, silk).
- Use an air conditioner with the thermostat set lower than normal, or use an electric fan.
- Take cool showers.
- Put a cold pack under your pillow (i.e. by turning the pillow, you can then ensure that your head is always resting on a cool surface).
- Use layered bedding that can be easily removed during the night.
- Use water sprays and/or moist wipes to keep your skin cool.

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### **Eat well, stay active, fit and relaxed**

- Evidence suggests that being overweight or having a sedentary lifestyle may increase the frequency and/or severity of a person's hot flushes.
- Regular exercise – combined with a healthy diet – can help you to achieve and/or maintain a healthy body weight.
- Relaxation techniques, including hypnosis, meditation or even sessions with a professional counsellor, may help some women to keep a calm and positive outlook on life.

### **Pace your breathing during a hot flush**

- Evidence suggests that regulating your breathing may help to control flushing episodes – take slow, deep, abdominal breaths in through the nose and let them out through the mouth.
- Other relaxation or meditation techniques may also help to minimise symptoms.



## Natural or complementary therapies

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- Some women may find that 'natural' or 'complementary' therapies may indeed help to relieve their hot flushes; however, it is important to know that there is no conclusive scientific evidence to support the use of these therapies and the cost for no proven benefit may be considerable.
- Therapies that have actually failed to offer patients any significant benefit in formal scientific studies include evening primrose oil, red clover isoflavone extracts, dong quai and ginseng. These therapies performed just as well as placebos.
- Be aware that natural or complementary therapies have the potential to cause side effects and/or affect how well your other medications work. They may also be expensive.
- The long-term safety of some natural or complementary therapies also remains unknown (e.g. plant-derived oestrogens, such as isoflavone extracts and soy products, can theoretically increase a person's risk of breast cancer recurrence, but no properly designed, long-term studies have been conducted to test this theory).

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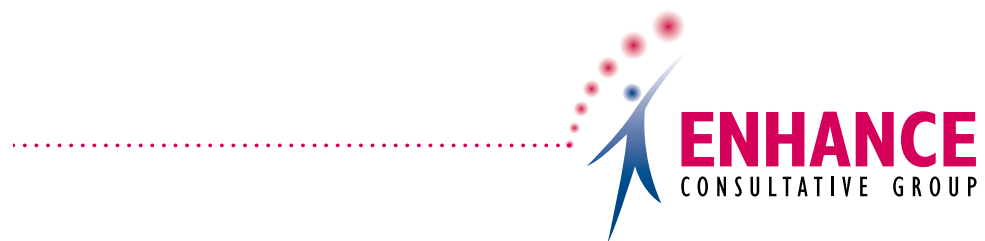
Always consult  
your doctor before  
taking a natural  
or complementary  
therapy.



## Prescription medications

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- If hot flushes prove difficult to prevent or manage, and if they continue to cause undue distress, embarrassment and/or disruption in your day-to-day life, then you should speak with your doctor about the possibility of trying a prescription medication.
- Several types of medications (e.g. clonidine, gabapentin and venlafaxine) have been shown to help reduce the frequency and/or severity of hot flushes. See your doctor to discuss your treatment options.
- Your doctor can advise you about the available treatment options, explaining how they work, informing you about any potential risks or side effects and helping you decide which particular treatment option is likely to best suit your individual needs.
- It is important to tell all of your medical practitioners what prescription and non-prescription medications you are taking, particularly if you are taking antidepressants, as some may interfere with your breast cancer treatment.



Other publications from the ENHANCE Consultative Group include:

- Managing joint symptoms
- The importance of staying on treatment
- Understanding menopause
- Sexual wellbeing
- Managing vaginal bleeding

## The Enhance Consultative Group

The ENHANCE (ENdocrine Health and Adjuvant Management of Breast CaNCER) Consultative Group is a collaboration of 19 doctors with an interest in the management of breast cancer. The Group involves specialists from around Australia and includes breast surgeons, medical oncologists, endocrinologists and gynaecologists. Recommendations for patients generated by the Group are reviewed by a national breast cancer advocacy group prior to circulation.

Hormonal therapy has proven extremely effective in the management of breast cancer in patients who have what is termed 'hormone receptor-positive disease'. Such therapy, however, can be associated with unwanted menopausal symptoms. The aim of the Group is to provide practical advice on how to best manage these side effects and to help improve the quality of life of people taking this type of medication.



The ENHANCE Consultative Group is an educational initiative supported by AstraZeneca.

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