

# Managing menopause symptoms without using hormones

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Menopause is when your ovaries stop working for good, usually when you are around 49 to 52 years old. At this time you stop menstruating or having periods. Menopause is usually defined as one year without a period.

The ovaries produce hormones such as estrogen and progesterone. The lack of estrogen causes menopause. Symptoms of menopause can be many such as hot flashes, mood changes and sleep changes.

Sometimes menopause can be caused by certain treatments and surgery. While the symptoms of menopause can often be managed with hormone replacement therapy, there are many instances when this is **not** advised. For instance, women with cancer may be advised **not** to use hormone replacement therapy. This handout will explain some of the ways to manage menopause symptoms without using hormones.

If you continue to experience menopausal symptoms after trying the suggestions in this handout, please speak with your oncologist, family doctor, nurse practitioner or nurse. For more information, see the resources listed on the back page.

## Treatment related causes of menopause

### Can chemotherapy cause menopause?

Yes. If you have a period and start chemotherapy, your period may stop. This happens because chemotherapy may stop the ovaries from producing estrogen.

- If you are over age 50, chemotherapy-related menopause is usually permanent.
- If you are under age 50, periods may return after chemotherapy is completed. It may take up to 2 years for periods to return. If your periods return, hot flashes will usually go away until your body goes into menopause naturally.

**I take Tamoxifen or Aromatase Inhibitors, do they cause menopause?**

- No. Aromatase inhibitors are only taken if you are already in menopause.
- Tamoxifen will not cause menopause if you have not had chemotherapy.

**What other treatments cause menopause?****Surgery**

- Ovaries produce estrogen.

During a hysterectomy the ovaries may or may not be removed, but the uterus is removed so you will not have a period. If the ovaries are removed, menopause happens after the surgery. If your ovaries are not removed, you will not have a period but estrogen is still being produced therefore you will not be in menopause. You may then experience menopausal symptoms at the age of natural menopause (age 49 to 52).

**Radiation**

- If you receive radiation to the ovaries, the ovaries will stop working. The ovaries stop producing estrogen and menopause happens.

**Ovarian suppression**

- Medications can be used to suppress or stop the function of the ovaries which stops periods temporarily and menopause happens. Once the medications are stopped, ovarian function and periods may return depending on your age.

**What are the symptoms of menopause and how can I manage them?**

You may not have all of these symptoms, but common ones include:

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|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> hot flashes – the most common                      | <input type="checkbox"/> sexual changes – loss of sex drive, painful intercourse (sex) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> memory changes                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> vaginal dryness   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> mood changes – irritable, weepy, feeling depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> bone changes – low bone mineral density                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sleep changes                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> bladder changes– leaking urine                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> weight gain  |  |
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## Hot flashes

Most women find hot flashes to be the worst symptom. If your periods return after cancer treatment, hot flashes will usually go away.

### What is a hot flash?

It can range from a warm feeling to an intense rush of body heat often feeling like your face and/or body are on fire. Some women may feel a slight change in heart beat while others experience a racing heart beat, rapid breathing, dizziness and nausea. Hot flashes come and go. The intensity of the hot flash varies from woman to woman.

Feelings of anxiety, panic, distress, embarrassment and irritation are common with hot flashes but also vary from woman to woman.

### What causes a hot flash?

- Although we can't say for sure, hot flashes may be a result of changes in your body's thermostat. The body's thermostat (temperature monitor) is controlled by the brain. The area that controls the thermostat in the brain is called the hypothalamus. Decreasing estrogen may be responsible for changes with the thermostat. Your body feels overheated and tries to cool down by:
  - Having blood rush to the surface of the skin. This spreads the heat around causing the red flushing feeling. This allows the blood to cool down on the skin surface.
  - Sweating. Sweat helps to lower body temperature. You may get a cold chill as your body temperature decreases.

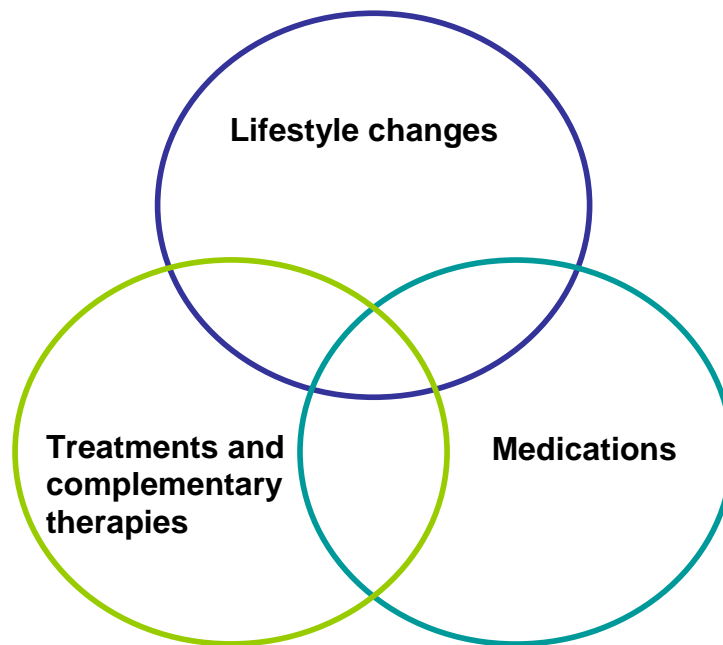
### How long do hot flashes last?

- Hot flashes may last 30 seconds to 30 minutes or longer.
- **Over time hot flashes get shorter and less severe.** Usually hot flashes are more intense when they first start and over time (this may take months to years) become less intense and disappear.

## What can help with the symptoms or how to keep “cool”?

Usually a combination of lifestyle changes, different treatments/complementary therapies and sometimes medications may relieve the symptoms.

Symptoms usually improve over time (usually months to several years).



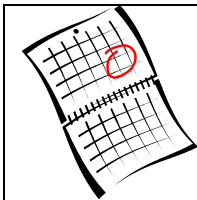
It takes time to figure out what can help you to keep cool: read on for suggestions that may help you.

### **Lifestyle changes: eating and exercise**

- Regular exercise and eating healthy foods may increase your overall sense of well-being which may decrease the amount or intensity of hot flashes.
- Identify what foods or products trigger a hot flash.
  - Common triggers include: caffeine (dark pop, tea, coffee, caffeinated herbal teas, chocolate), alcohol, smoking, and spicy foods. Try to limit or stop using these products.

## Lifestyle changes

- Wear light weight cotton or other natural fibre clothing. Wear layers that can be removed in layers when a hot flash happens.
- Use fans and air conditioning.
- Decrease the room temperature.
- Improve your sense of well-being. Managing stress can help with this.
- Wash with lukewarm water instead of hot water when showering or taking a bath.
- Take time to have the hot flash. Excuse yourself from whatever you are doing and go to a well ventilated area (fresh air).
- Drink a glass of cold water or run your wrists under cold water during a hot flash.
- Use cotton sheets and wear light sleeping clothes. Put an ice gel pack inside your pillowcase and flip to the cool side when you have a hot flash.



Track your hot flashes for a few days: time of day, how long, severity of hot flash, what you were doing at the time. See if you can find a common pattern. Ask yourself: What could I change?

## Complementary and alternative therapies/products

- Pace your breathing by taking slow deep breaths when hot flashes come on. Aim to take about 6 to 8 breaths per minute. While doing this allow your thinking to be calm; this may decrease how severe the hot flash feels.
- Acupuncture may be helpful. Most treatment plans include an intensive phase first, then followed by an ongoing maintenance phase. Ask the acupuncturist about their success in treating hot flashes.
- Some herbals can be helpful for hot flashes, but they mimic estrogen in the body. These are called phytoestrogens. Other herbals have not shown to significantly reduce hot flashes. You need to understand what herbals could benefit you and be aware that some herbals can cause harm. **Oncologists often recommend not taking phytoestrogens.**
- Self-hypnosis may reduce hot flashes, but more research is needed.

## Medications

- There are medications (certain antidepressants and other medications) that may be used to treat hot flashes. Research has shown that these medications may decrease the symptoms of hot flashes by half.
- Medications have side effects and many of the medications used for hot flashes should not be stopped suddenly.
- Because hot flashes get better over time, you may wish to stop these medications. This needs to be done slowly with the advice of your family doctor or nurse practitioner.



Hormone replacement therapy (estrogen/progesterone) can relieve hot flashes. **It is not recommended for women who have had breast cancer.** Taking hormone replacement therapy can increase the risk of cancer returning or the development of a new breast cancer.

## Memory and mood changes

- It is not known why or if memory changes are a result from menopause. Changes in memory can happen as you get older.
- Your emotions and mood may go up and down. Dealing with these changes can be difficult and challenging.
- While you are on chemotherapy you may experience memory related changes (brain or chemo fog).

### What may help:

- Try increasing your sense of well-being by getting enough rest, a good night's sleep, reducing stress and exercising regularly.
- Participate in activities you enjoy like walking, visiting family and friends, doing crafts and reading.

## Sleep changes

You may have trouble getting a restful sleep. This may or may not be related to hot flashes. To start, establish a good routine and sleep in a quiet dark room. Try to avoid daytime napping, TV or computer use 1 to 2 hours before bedtime and limit alcohol and caffeine. Please see the resource section for more helpful suggestions.

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## Weight gain

Weight gain is common after menopause. It is important to eat a healthy diet and get regular exercise to avoid weight gain. A dietitian will be able to provide advice about healthy eating.

## Loss of sex drive, vaginal dryness, painful intercourse

Cancer treatment and/or menopause may cause a loss of sex drive. The reasons for this may be different for each person. Talking with your spouse/partner may be helpful. You may want to speak with your health care provider or a social worker in Supportive Care at the JCC – 905-387-9495, ext. 64315.

Menopause can cause vaginal dryness that can make sex uncomfortable or painful. Skin inside and around the outside of the vagina can be dry and sensitive. Using a water-based moisturizer (inserted into the vagina like a tampon) 2 to 3 times a week and water-based lubricant during sex can help keep the skin area moist. If this does not help, there may be another reason or health condition for vaginal dryness or discomfort. Speak with your health care provider if your symptoms persist. Some women may benefit from low dose estrogen vaginal cream or tablets, but you will need to see your health care provider to discuss this possibility.

## Bone changes

Bones can thin or lose density with aging for both women and men. You will not feel these changes, but these changes can increase the risk of osteoporosis and bone fractures. Eating foods with calcium such as dairy products, almonds, dark leafy vegetables, and taking Vitamin D will help. Regular weight bearing exercise is important for bone health.

## Leaking urine

You may leak urine, or need to pass urine more often.

- Drink less after 5:00 p.m. to decrease the need to urinate at night.
- Smoking may irritate the bladder which can cause you to urinate more often.
- Citrus foods, tomato based foods and caffeine may irritate the bladder.
- Keep your skin in the perineal area clean and dry. You may need to wear a menstrual or incontinence pad.
- Perform pelvic muscle exercises or kegel exercises. Ask your health care provider for directions if you do not know how to do them.
- If leaking worsens or if you develop a burning sensation with urination, you should see your health care provider.

## Spouses, friends and families: “How can I help?”

Your wife, friend or mother is going through menopause. Although menopause is a part of a woman’s life, it can be more significant if:

- Instant menopause is caused by cancer treatments.
- Hormone replacement therapy was stopped because of cancer.

### To provide support and understanding:

- Ask “what can I do to decrease your distress?” “How can I help?”
- Lower the temperature in the house (wear sweaters).
- Use fans around the house.
- If you notice that your wife, friend, or family member is overly sad (withdrawn, weepy, unable to maintain normal daily routine), encourage her to see her health care provider.
- Learn more about menopause and what can help.
- Remember that hot flashes get better over time.

## Web resources

- **BreastCancer.org**  
[www.breastcancer.org/tips/menopausal/facing/hot\\_flashes.jsp](http://www.breastcancer.org/tips/menopausal/facing/hot_flashes.jsp)
- **North American Menopause Society** [www.menopause.org](http://www.menopause.org)
- **The Mayo Clinic**  
[www.mayoclinic.com/health/menopause/DS00119/DSECTION=symptoms](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/menopause/DS00119/DSECTION=symptoms)
- **National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine**  
<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/menopause/menopausesymptoms.htm>
- **Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center** [www.mskcc.org/about/herbs](http://www.mskcc.org/about/herbs)
- **Osteoporosis Canada** [www.osteoporosis.ca/](http://www.osteoporosis.ca/)
- **Cancer related brain fog**  
[www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/documents/Patient%20Education/BrainFogCancerRelatedPORTRAIT-th.pdf](http://www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/documents/Patient%20Education/BrainFogCancerRelatedPORTRAIT-th.pdf)
- **Getting a good night’s sleep after cancer treatment**  
[www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/documents/Patient%20Education/CancerTreatGoodNightSleep-th.pdf](http://www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/documents/Patient%20Education/CancerTreatGoodNightSleep-th.pdf)