

Is it just me, or is it hot in here?

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For many women, hot flushes are not only inconvenient – they can also be embarrassing and may stop you getting a good night's sleep too.

Poor quality sleep can, in turn, result in irritability, poor memory and even digestive problems. While many who have not experienced hot flushes dismiss them as inconsequential, for those who do experience them they can be a major problem: care has to be taken over which clothes to wear so that layers can be removed as the flushes occur; often the face and neck colours, which can be mistaken for embarrassment or awkwardness – which can be embarrassing itself. Moreover, if flushes coincide with the onset of the menopause (the most usual time for them, but not always the reason), this can represent a difficult time emotionally for women, as they come to terms with a new stage beginning in their lives.

Why are they happening?

As women approach the menopause, the level of oestrogen produced by the ovaries reduces, and symptoms can occur. The menopause generally occurs when women are aged between 45 and 53, but it can be earlier, particularly if you have had a hysterectomy.

Some women have no symptoms, but around three quarters experience hot flushes. Typically a flush lasts for a few minutes and heat is felt either all over the body or just on the torso, neck and head. The flush can be accompanied by weakness, nausea and a feeling of faintness.

When do they happen?

As many as 20 flushes a day may be experienced, although some women just have one occasionally. Stressful situations may exacerbate them and frequently night-time is the worst, when the flushes can be accompanied by profuse perspiration which can wake you. Partners frequently complain about windows being kept open and covers kicked off the bed.

What can I do?

Conventional treatment is Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), which maintains oestrogen levels in the body, and effectively postpones the menopause. There have been some health scares around HRT and some women prefer not to use it. Others use HRT for a period of time, and then choose to stop, at which time their flushes can reappear.

Are there some natural alternatives?

Certain foods may aggravate flushes, in particular caffeine (in tea and coffee), alcohol and spicy foods.

A number of supplements have been found to help alleviate the symptoms:

- **Natural progesterone creams** seem to be very helpful for some women
- **Sage drops** can be bought at health food shops and can prove effective
- The herb **Black Cohosh** seems to work well in reducing the frequency of flushes for many women, although recent research indicating a possible link to liver disease has left some women concerned about using it. You should avoid it if you have any history of liver disease or consult a qualified herbalist.
- **Red clover** may be of benefit, but may be unsuitable for women who are taking blood-thinning medication such as Warfarin
- **Evening Primrose oil** seems to have a calming affect during hormonal changes and is a useful source of essential fatty acids which can prevent the skin from becoming dry

Homeopathy is a very effective way to treat hot flushes, and many women use it to address the problem as shown by Sara's treatment (see box). Although not all cases are resolved as quickly and easily as this, a combination of natural treatments can be an excellent way to sail through the menopause and embrace the beginning of a new phase in your life.

Sara sought professional homeopathic treatment after suffering with hot flushes for several months. She had been on HRT for some years but decided to stop taking it, after which her flushes were terrible. Her daughter was getting married and she was very concerned about the flushes occurring during the wedding. A case history was taken which noted the frequency and severity of the flushes – she was experiencing about 10 a day and they were worse at night. It also seemed that fresh air seemed to help them, and that tight clothing around her neck and waist made them worse. Sara's medical history showed that she was prone to headaches which were alleviated if she had a nose bleed. Taking these factors into account together with her outgoing and very talkative personality she was given the homeopathic remedy Lachesis. A week after taking just a few tablets the flushes stopped. About 8 months later she experienced some hot flushes again, but another dose of the remedy seemed to resolve the problem.