
Managing side-effects - Hot flushes

Some women experience one or more side-effects from taking hormone therapy, others do not. There is no way to predict who will experience side-effects, and who won't.

It's important not to assume that any unwanted effect you might be experiencing after breast cancer is solely due to hormone therapy. There are a range of possible causes, such as other treatments (e.g. chemotherapy) or medicines. The normal ageing process and the menopause can also account for some symptoms women can experience. So stopping hormone therapy would not necessarily mean symptoms would disappear.

Side-effects can vary in level of intensity and this can change over time; a side-effect may become less frequent or intense or disappear altogether as time goes on. Again, it's not possible to predict whether this will happen to you. **Rather than looking at all the side effects now, you may find it helpful to come back to this page if and when your side effects change.**

The good news is that **there are many things that can help with side-effects.** This section includes information about some of the most common side-effects women can experience, and a range of tips and hints for managing these.

This section includes information on the following topics:

- Practical tips for managing hot flushes
- Practical tips for managing night sweats
- Using a diary to keep track of triggers
- Managing hot flushes at work
- Changing how you respond to hot flushes
- Further information

Hot flushes

Many women with breast cancer experience hot flushes and/or night sweats. Some women also experience chills. This is due to changes in oestrogen levels.

Many women are able to manage these but for some they can be really hard to deal with and unpleasant. It is important to know that **there are many things that you**

can try to help with hot flushes, and remember that you are not on your own. If you are struggling to cope with hot flushes or night sweats, then you may find the hints and tips in this section helpful. These tips are based on research studies and experiences of women similar to you who've taken hormone therapy.

What are hot flushes?

A hot flush is a sudden feeling of warmth, which is usually most intense over the face, neck and chest, although it can also occur on the upper back. Your skin might redden, as if you're blushing. A hot flush can also cause sweating and increased heart rate. If you lose too much body heat, you might feel chilled afterwards. Hot flushes at night can sometimes lead to disturbed sleep and waking in a cold, damp bed; this is referred to as a night sweat.

Not all women on hormone therapy experience hot flushes or night sweats. For women who do experience them, the frequency can vary a lot – from less than one a day to many a day.

They can be mild to severe. Some women experience them for a short period of time. Other women experience them for many years, with the severity changing over time.

What is happening in my body to make me flush?

Hot flushes are thought to occur due to changes in oestrogen levels which are caused by hormone therapy.

Oestrogen seems to affect our internal body temperature control. Usually, when the body feels too hot it will sweat to cool itself down. When it feels too cold, it will shiver to warm itself up. Our core body temperature can change by up to half a degree centigrade without us feeling too hot and starting to sweat, or too cold and starting to shiver.

During the menopause, as oestrogen levels drop, the range of temperature changes that the body is comfortable with becomes much smaller. This means that small changes can tip the body into feeling too hot (and therefore sweating) or feeling too cold (and shivering). It is likely that this also happens when hormone therapy causes oestrogen levels to change.

Other hormones, such as stress hormones, can also trigger flushes. This also means that if you are under stress you may have more hot flushes. But the good news is that practising relaxation can help to reduce the triggering of hot flushes.

Practical tips for managing hot flushes

Here are some practical tips that can help you to manage your hot flushes:

- Keep your surroundings cool and wear cool, loose fitting clothes. Absorbent materials such as cotton or linen are more comfortable. Many women swap to wearing light layers that are easy to take on and off as needed.
- Some women find that changes in temperature can trigger hot flushes. If you find this to be the case for you, try to keep the temperature within your house as constant as possible
- Carry something that you can fan yourself with; card or paper can make an effective fan, but an electric or battery-operated fan is best. Some fans come with a spray and this gives a better cooling effect.
- If you are a smoker, stopping smoking may reduce your hot flushes.
- Try cooling products, such as towels, gel filled pillows (Chillow Pillow) and gel neck ties, which some women find helpful

“Hot flushes now come and go worse some days and nights than others. I now dress my top part in layers and don’t ever think I could wear a jumper again! By layers you can discreetly remove if you feel you are overheating and then replace when you get cold! I do have a cold gel mat which was wonderful in the summer to just lay your head on at night or place anywhere you want”

Mary, Breast Cancer Patient, Age 48

- Avoid alcohol, caffeine and spicy foods as these may trigger hot flushes.
- During a flush, try drinking cold water.
- Try taking your hormone therapy tablets at a different time of day, for example, before going to bed rather than first thing in the morning. Some women find that taking their tablets in the evening means they sleep through the side-effects, whereas others prefer to take them in the morning.

“I changed to taking them after my evening meal instead of in the morning after breakfast, but I did notice and became prepared for a big hot flush 30 to 45 minutes later! My husband also became aware of this timing, usually when we were sitting on the sofa watching tv with a sudden rush on my part to take off jumpers and socks and any other removable clothing!... It did seem to reduce the number of hot flushes in the daytime when I might be out and about and not want to be embarrassed by them”

Margaret, Breast Cancer Patient, Age 72

- Some women find that being physically active, being back at work or **keeping busy with a hobby or other activity** makes them much less aware of hot flushes.

- Try **complementary forms of therapy** for your hot flushes. For example, some women find treatments such as acupuncture, hypnotherapy, and reflexology, and relaxation techniques like mindfulness, are helpful.
- Some women choose to **introduce different foods or supplements into their diet** in order to help manage their hot flushes. There is conflicting advice about many of these supplements so it is best to speak to your GP or breast cancer team before introducing any supplements or herbal remedies into your diet.
- You may find it helpful to **speak to your friends and family** and tell them how you are feeling. They might not know how much the hot flushes are impacting your life unless you tell them.
- **Try not to compare yourself to other woman who also experience hot flushes.** The frequency and intensity of hot flushes may differ between women.
- If the hot flushes are very bothersome, you could **speak to your breast cancer team or GP about other medications** that can be prescribed to help control the hot flushes. Medications such as venlafaxine, citalopram and gabapentin have been shown to help reduce hot flushes.

"I have regular severe hot flushes and flashes throughout the day and night. My oncologist has prescribed citalopram for these hot flushes which I used to take at bedtime. The hot flushes were so severe in the day that my whole head would drip with sweat soaking my hair and face...I have switched times so that I now take the tablet first thing in the morning. Although I am still getting severe flushes I think it is occurring slightly less frequently."

Anne, Breast Cancer Patient, Age 58

Practical tips for managing night sweats

Night sweats can be particularly difficult to deal with as they can disrupt sleep and can leave you feeling tired the next day. Worrying at night about sleeplessness and feeling tired the next day can lead to anxiety which then makes sleep less likely.

Here are some practical tips that can help you to manage your night sweats:

- **Create good sleep habits.** For example, develop a good bedtime routine and limit caffeine and alcohol, both of which can affect sleep. You can read more about sleep habits in the sleep disruption section.

- **Use cotton sheets with a low thread count** (300 or less), or silk sheets, as these will keep you cooler at night than sheets with manmade fibres (such as polyester).
- **Try removing any heavy, thick duvets from your bed** or replace these with natural products which are more “breathable”, such as a light-weight wool quilt.
- **Placing a towel in your bed** can absorb some of the sweat, preventing your sheets from becoming drenched.
- Some women also use a **Chillow Pillow**, gel topped mattress, or other similar products, which remain cool throughout the night.

“I did find out about a product “chillow” (cooling pillow insert) I’m sure that there are other things available. My feet were always roaring hot for some reason, and it was lovely to put them on a cold pad!”

Seema, Breast Cancer Patient, Age 62

- Try **complementary forms of therapy** for your night sweats. For example, some women find treatments such as acupuncture, hypnotherapy, and reflexology, and relaxation techniques like mindfulness, helpful.
- Some women choose to **introduce different foods or supplements into their diet** in order to help manage their night sweats. There is conflicting advice about many of these supplements so it is best to speak to your GP or breast cancer team before introducing any supplements or herbal remedies into your diet.

You may find it helpful to watch some videos of women with breast cancer talking about their experiences of taking tamoxifen, and how they learnt to cope with side effects. You can watch these videos by typing in this weblink into your web browser: <https://healthtalk.org/breast-cancer-women/tamoxifen>

Practical tips for managing chills

There isn’t much you can do to stop chills – but there are some things you can do to manage a chill when it happens

- Have an extra layer to put on
- Move around and keep active
- Try relaxation techniques like deep breathing or mindfulness. Click the button below to find out more about using paced breathing and relaxation to manage chills.

Using paced breathing and relaxation

Relaxation and paced breathing can be used to calm down your body's physical and emotional reactions. Using these techniques when you feel the start of a flush or a chill will help you to pause and remind you to engage in neutral and calming thoughts. Focus on your breathing and just let the chill pass. This can help reduce the physical symptoms associated with the chills.

Paced breathing

Paced breathing is slow, even breathing from your stomach. The diaphragm is located just below the lungs and forms a barrier between the lungs and the stomach. Breathing from the stomach or below the diaphragm increases the space in your lungs, so that we get more oxygen, and it also has a calming effect. If practiced regularly, paced or diaphragmatic breathing can help you to relax.

You can practice by keeping the chest and shoulders still and pushing the stomach out as you breathe in, and taking slow, deeper breaths. Putting one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach helps as you get used to this way of breathing. The hand on your chest should stay fairly still and the hand on your stomach should rise and fall as you breathe. It might be easier to practise this lying down at first. Once you get used to it you will be able to use this breathing for a few minutes during the day to reduce stress and to feel calm. Let your shoulders relax and focus on your breathing for a few minutes can give you time to pause and to think how you want to react in a stressful situation.

You might find it helpful to watch this video, which simply allows you to breath in time with the animation, slowing your breathing down. To watch it, type this weblink into your browser: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLbK0o9Bk7Q>.

Paced breathing is an important part of the CBT approach for hot flushes and night sweats. As with any skill it requires regular practice. At the onset of a flush or a chill – relax your shoulders – breathe slowly from your stomach – concentrate on your breathing.

Use a diary to keep track of triggers

Many women report that alcohol, coffee and spicy food act as a trigger for their hot flushes.

If you keep a diary of your hot flushes and note down what was happening just before the flush you might be able to identify your hot flush triggers. Then, by

making small practical changes to remove the triggers, you can start to gain some control over the flushes.

You can make notes in the **My Hormone Therapy Diary** on the HT&Me website.

Managing hot flushes at work

With the right support, there's no need for women who are still working to have to stop due to hot flushes. Your employer has a legal duty to ensure that your working conditions don't exacerbate your symptoms, and to protect you (as their employee) from discrimination. You **can ask for a risk assessment and for adjustments to your work environment or working pattern.** This could include things such as temperature and ventilation, flexible working patterns, the materials used in uniforms and access to toilet facilities, cold water and rest spaces. Talk to your employer about what would help you, as everyone is different.

In the same way that it can be helpful to share how hot flushes are affecting you with friends or family, some women find it helpful to speak to work colleagues.

"But what made the world of difference for me was the support of my then line manager but also of my colleagues, my friends and my family. With their understanding I felt confident and free, particularly in the workplace to tell people how I felt, to tell them I felt a little out of sorts, or I'm popping outside just to cool down, I didn't need to look for an excuse, I was able to be open and honest to have that 5 minutes, then come back and get on with my working day."

A Union Member, Taken From Unison.Org

Change how you respond to hot flushes

This section has been adapted from Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) for Menopausal Symptoms by Myra Hunter, Professor of Clinical Health Psychology at King's College London. You can read more about Professor Hunter's approach by typing the following weblink into your browser: <https://healthandher.com/expert-advice/all-symptoms/cbt-for-menopause/>

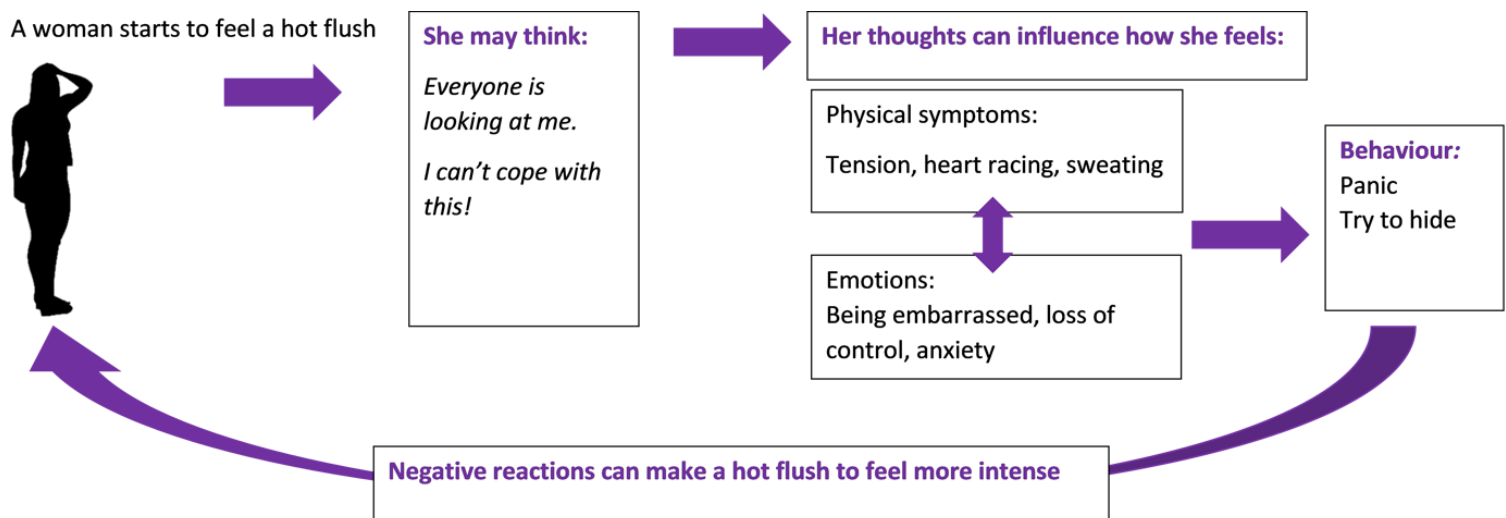
Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) focuses on the links between: physical symptoms, thoughts, feelings and behaviour. CBT can be used to manage hot flushes. The way we think about our hot flushes can affect the emotions we feel and

what we do in response to the flush, and these reactions can in turn increase intensity of the hot flushes.

Thinking about hot flushes and night sweats as something that you can deal with (and not a threat) can make you feel more in control of them.

How can CBT help me manage hot flushes?

Here is an example of a typical experience of and reaction to a hot flush.



CBT can help you to find ways to reduce these negative reactions to hot flushes. **Learning calmer more neutral responses may help you to feel more in control and more able to cope.** This, in turn, might help reduce how severe the flushes feel.

Below is an example of how **changing what you think about a hot flush - seeing it as something that you can cope with rather than as a threat - can help react to it in a neutral and calm way.**

A woman starts to feel a hot flush



She may think:

*This will pass on.
Let's see how I
can deal with this
one.*



Her thoughts can influence how she feels:

Physical symptoms:

Body relaxes, heart rate slows
back to normal



Emotions:

Becoming calmer, more
accepting and relaxed



Behaviour:
Breathing
through the
flush until it
passes



Calm, neutral response can make a woman to feel in control.

**Woman experiences a calmer hot flush, without the added physical
symptoms: stress and anxiety.**

Change your thoughts about hot flushes

Hot flushes are typically associated with negative thoughts and worries. For example:

- **Social embarrassment** - "I look terrible", "Everyone is staring at me"
- **Lack of control** - "This is out of control", "I can't cope with these", "not again!"

You may find it helpful to spend some time thinking about your own concerns and worries around hot flushes. **Becoming aware of these thoughts will help you to reduce any negative feelings or behaviours that are associated with these thoughts.**

Notice what goes through your mind when you have a hot flush. Think about situations where you find hot flushes to be particularly stressful. Once you have identified your thoughts during a hot flush, **try to develop some calmer, more supportive responses to hot flushes.** For example:

Self-critical response	Self-supporting response
I can't cope.	Let's see how well I can deal with this. One flush at a time.
Everyone is staring at me.	I will notice my flushes far more than other people. They probably don't even notice.
I am out of control.	There are things I can do to take control. I can try paced breathing.
They will go on forever.	They will reduce gradually over time.

Now you can have a go at creating some supportive and neutral responses to your own thoughts about hot flushes.

It might help to ask yourself:

- Is this thought really accurate?
- What would a close friend/family member say to me?
- What would I say to them if they were having a hot flush in this situation?
- What would a self-supportive alternative be?

You can use the box below to note some of your thoughts which may be more negative or critical. Once you have listed these, write and develop an alternative and more supportive thought for each one: use the questions and suggestions above to help you.

Critical, negative thoughts	Supportive, neutral thoughts
	➡
	➡



How women found doing this activity

"I think it's good. I like interaction. I like writing it down, getting involved. I think it makes you analyse your thoughts as well and how you really feel about it which is good because I think sometimes you get worked up but you don't know why maybe but looking at this you see social embarrassment and stuff and you think, "yes, actually," because I feel like my face is going red or I feel like I'm starting to sweat and it's in front of people. So, analysing why they become a big deal, it will help you to do that so yes, definitely asking you to write down your thoughts is a good thing."

Rose, Breast Cancer Patient, Age 35

"I think what this is encouraging you to do, it's finding other ways of changing how you feel and think about it and about the flush and just letting it pass and exactly what you're saying here, becoming aware of your thoughts and helping yourself to reduce the negative feeling and behaviour that straight away gets... it's like as soon as the hot flush starts the negative thoughts start. So it's retraining yourself to think, "okay, I've got another one coming but what am I going to do about it this time? Am I going to just let it control me or am I going to be more in control?" So, I think it's good because it's normalising it. It's saying it's okay to be like it and there are things we can do to help and encouraging you to do a bit of self-help as well because it's not one size fits all."

It's got to be what works for an individual and i think that's encouraged by asking you to put your thoughts down. I think that's good. I think it's not for everyone i suppose. You'll have women that won't want to write down things but then breast cancer strips you bare. It really does, at times, leave you with no resource mentally and physically so actually is it a big deal to write things down because you're at the lowest of the low anyway. So, filling it out, what have you got to lose?"

Sue, breast cancer patient, Age 52

Change your thoughts about night sweats

Night sweats are typically associated with negative thoughts and worries. Waking up at night with night sweats can make your mind race.

It is easier to deal with the worrying thoughts in the daytime so instead of worrying in the night-time, say to yourself, 'I'll deal with this tomorrow when I can think clearly'. Then, return to your automatic routine, without engaging with the thoughts. If you are able to manage anxious thinking, it will be easier to get back to sleep after a night sweat.

Here are some examples of changing negative or worrying thinking into calmer more helpful thoughts:

Self-critical response	Self-supporting response
'I won't be able to function tomorrow'	'I have managed before so I know I can cope'
'I'll never get a decent night's sleep again'	'This is tough at the moment but will pass'
'I've got so much to do tomorrow'	'I can prioritise what I need to do and a bit of distraction will help me get on with things'

Now you can have a go at creating some supportive and neutral responses to your own thoughts about night sweats.

It might help to ask yourself:

- Is this thought really accurate?
- What would a close friend/family member say to me?
- What would I say to them if they were having a night sweat in this situation?
- What would a self-supportive alternative be?

You can use this box to note some of your thoughts which may be more negative or critical. Once you have listed these, type and develop an alternative and more supportive thought for each one: use the questions and suggestions above to help you.

Critical, negative thoughts	Supportive, neutral thoughts
	➡
	➡
	➡

Paced breathing and relaxation

Using paced breathing and relaxation can help you stay calm during a hot flush or a night sweat.

Relaxation and paced breathing can be used to calm down your body's physical and emotional reactions. Using these techniques when you feel the start of a flush will help you to pause and remind you to engage in neutral and calming thoughts. Focus on your breathing and just let the hot flush flow over you. This can help reduce the physical symptoms associated with the flush.

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Using paced breathing at night

You can use paced breathing during the day when you have a flush, and at night during a night sweat. It helps you to remain calm and wait for the symptom to pass. Once you start feeling anxious or stressed it will be harder to get back to sleep.

When you experience a night sweat it may help to:

1. Do what you need to cool down, for example, remove bedclothes for a bit
2. Try not to think too much whilst doing this, and focus on your breathing
3. Once you have cooled off, get back into bed and practise paced breathing and relaxation

Further help and support

What should I do if these problems are really impacting on my life?

If these hints and tips do not help and the problems with hot flushes or night sweats become very difficult for you, or get worse as time goes on, and badly impact on your day-to-day life, it is important to talk to your breast cancer team or GP. They may be able to suggest something which will help.

Support from Breast Cancer Now Nurses

You may find it helpful to use the confidential 'Ask our nurses' email service on the Breast Cancer Now website, especially if you find it difficult to talk to someone in person. To access this type the following weblink into your browser:

<https://breastcancernow.org/information-support/support-you/email-our-nurses>

Where can I speak to other women?

You do not have to cope with hot flushes and night sweats on your own. You may find it helpful to join online forums and support groups to talk to other women who are in a similar situation to you. One example of this is the Breast Cancer Now online forum. To take a look, type the following weblink into your browser:

<https://forum.breastcancernow.org/>

Other websites and resources

Here are links to other websites and reading that you may find helpful. To take a look, type the following weblinks into your browser:

- To go to Breast Cancer Now: <https://breastcancernow.org/information-support/facing-breast-cancer/going-through-breast-cancer-treatment/hot-flushes-night-sweats>
- To go to Menopause café – 'gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss menopause': <https://www.menopausecafe.net/>
- To go to Menopause support, which provides private support and free resources about the menopause: <https://menopausesupport.co.uk/>

- To go to The British Menopausal Society for information about all elements of the menopause: <https://thebms.org.uk/>
- To go to The Daisy Network, a charity supporting women with premature menopause: <https://www.daisynetwork.org/>

If you feel that you have tried everything and the side-effects are still unbearable, do talk to your breast cancer team or GP who will be able to help you decide what to do. Often, they will be able to switch you to another form of hormone therapy or prescribe an additional treatment to help you. If that still doesn't work, the best decision for you might be to stop taking hormone therapy. Ultimately it is a personal decision taking into account the risks and benefits and what is right for you.

Acknowledgements

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