

Managing Hot Flashes for Patients with Breast Cancer

What are hot flashes?

Hot flashes are sudden feelings of intense heat. They may start in the face, neck, or chest and spread to your entire body. You may notice redness or flushing of your skin, a faster heartbeat, tingling in your fingers, and sweating.

Hot flashes may last from a few seconds to several minutes, but rarely last longer than 10 minutes. Hot flashes may occur at any time during the day or night.

What causes hot flashes?

Hot flashes are caused by changes in the hormone levels in your body. Hormonal changes may occur during menopause or with cancer treatments and medications used to prevent cancer. These treatments may include:

- Removal of the ovaries with surgery.
- Hormonal therapy such as tamoxifen, anastrozole, letrozole, exemestane.
- Chemotherapy.
- Medications that keep your ovaries from making hormones, such as goserelin or leuprolide.

How can I manage hot flashes?

All patients can use lifestyle changes to help with hot flashes. These changes can lower how often or how long you experience hot flashes:

- Lower temperature in your home or office.
- Wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothing.
- Dress in layers, which are easy to add or remove if you feel too hot or too cold.
- Stay away from hot or spicy foods, caffeine, alcohol, or other foods or drinks that cause hot flashes.
- Do not smoke.
- Carry a portable fan.
- Sip ice water at the beginning of a hot flash.
- Manage your stress with exercise or relaxation techniques.

Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises can help you cope with hot flashes as they happen.

What about herbal supplements?

Research does not support the use of herbal supplements to treat hot flashes. Some supplements act like estrogen in the body and make some cancer treatments less effective.

Talk with your cancer care team before starting any new medicines or supplements. Some of them may decrease the efficacy of your cancer treatments or cause unnecessary side effects.

What if my hot flashes are severe?

If your hot flashes are severe, talk to your oncology team about using a medication to treat your hot flashes. Some medications made for other purposes can be useful to treat hot flashes.

Hormone replacement therapy is usually not an option for most patients with breast cancer. Taking hormone replacement medications can make treatment less effective in patients with hormone-receptor positive breast cancer.