

## **International Menopause Society**

### **Hot flushes and night sweats - backgrounder**

Hot flushes and night sweats are the most common and best known symptoms which women experience when going through the menopause. Here is background information on these symptoms:

#### **What are Hot Flushes and Night Sweats?**

Hot flushes usually start with a sudden sensation of heat or warmth, often accompanied by sweating, reddening of the skin, and palpitations. It usually starts in the upper body, and then may spread. An 'average' hot flush last around 3 to 4 minutes, but they may last for only 30 seconds, or they may last up to an hour. A night sweat is simply a hot flush which happens when you are asleep. Hot flushes and night sweats are also referred to as Vasomotor Symptoms (VMS).

#### **What triggers them?**

They often start for no apparent reason, but they may also be provoked by such factors as embarrassment, coffee, alcohol, temperature change, and so on

#### **Do we understand why they happen?**

Not completely, but they are thought to result from fluctuations in the brain's temperature-regulating mechanism, and that this is caused by the decline in estrogen levels after menopause. Some drugs which lower estrogen levels, such as tamoxifen, can also cause flushing. This flushing can be quite severe in women who are being given tamoxifen for breast cancer.

#### **How common are they?**

There are large differences between women, both within and across cultures. For example, up to approximately 74% of European women suffer hot flushes, 50 to 68% in Latin America, and 22 to 63% in Asia. These differences are probably due to a variety of factors, such as genetics, diet, cultural differences, use of medicines, and individual experiences and cultural expectations.

#### **How long might they last for?**

In the West, the average age of menopause is 51 years. With most women who experience hot flushes they last for more than a year, with 4 years being the average (median) duration. However, some women experience hot flushes for up to 20 years.

#### **How serious are they?**

The good news is that the majority of women are not seriously affected. However a large number of women, around 20 to 25% of women report a lowered quality of life due to physical discomfort, social embarrassment, sleep disruption and mood changes, and the associated stress.

#### **What are effective treatments?**

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is the most effective treatment of hot flushes and night sweats. Up to 90% of all VMS disappear within 3 months. HRT treatment should be individualised, and discussed with a woman's doctor, and use reviewed regularly. SSRIs are also effective, with up to a 60% success rate for reduce severity and frequency of hot flushes.

**What else can be done?**

Recent work has shown that psychological interventions, using such methods as paced breathing (a slow deep breathing technique), muscle relaxation and biofeedback have proven useful in improving VMS symptoms. Acupuncture has shown some promise in VMS treatment, but this needs to be confirmed by good quality clinical trials.

**Tips for a healthy menopause**

1. Maintain a regular exercise routine.
2. Restrain intake of caffeine, sugar, salt and alcohol.
3. Do not smoke.
4. Eat foods containing adequate amounts of calcium and vitamin D.
5. Maintain a regular and sufficient sleep schedule.
6. Maintain a low-fat, well-balanced diet.
7. Take hormone therapy if needed.
8. Proactively manage menopause and use it as an opportunity to prevent disease and improve long-term health and quality of life.

More information is available on the IMS website, <http://www.imsociety.org/>

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