

HOT FLUSHES RELATED TO BREAST CANCER TREATMENT



Hot flushes are the most commonly reported symptom for women undergoing breast cancer treatment. This is often related to treatments like chemotherapy, hormone (endocrine) therapy and ovarian suppression.

The intensity of these hot flushes varies from individual to individual, and the frequency can be as little as a few a day, to a few every hour. Some women find that they just feel a warm sensation in their chest and face, whereas others may experience intense flushing and heavy sweating.

What causes a hot flush?

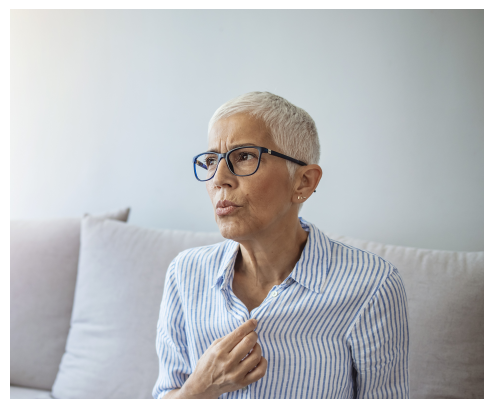
A hot flush is caused by the decreased level of the female hormone oestrogen in your body. When this level drops due to naturally occurring menopause or due to breast cancer treatment it can impact the part of your brain that regulates the body's temperature (the hypothalamus). If the hypothalamus feels that the body is too warm it tries to cool it down. It does this by dilating blood vessels close to the surface of the skin so body heat can escape. This causes the typical symptoms of redness and sweating.

The onset of heat during a hot flush is usually felt in the face, neck and chest. Hot flushes can come on suddenly or they can take a few minutes to fully develop. A hot flush lasts, on average, about four minutes and can vary in intensity and frequency from person to person. Some women report feeling anxious and irritable when they experience a hot flush and others feel like their heart is racing. It's not uncommon to feel cold as the hot flush eases. This is due to the body's sweat glands releasing sweat, which then evaporates, cooling the body down.

Some people experience hot flushes at night. These may feel particularly intense, and may lead to you waking up drenched in sweat and feeling cold and shivery. Over time, continued hot flushes at night can lead to sleep disturbances, ongoing tiredness and fatigue.

How can I manage my symptoms?

While there is no one best way to manage hot flushes, being informed about what works best is useful. You may find some of the tips below helpful.



Keep cool

- If you want to cool down quickly try standing outside in the fresh air or open a window to allow a breeze to circulate. A cool shower or a swim (in the summer months) can also bring your body temperature down quickly.
- Drinking cold water is an effective way to keep cool.
- Dress in layers that can be removed individually (if needed) during a hot flush. Wear natural, absorbent fibres close to your skin such as cotton.
- Keep a battery-operated or paper fan with you.
- Carry a water spray containing a fragrance of your choice to wet the skin. Allow this to air-dry.
- Keep a small towel in the fridge or run a flannel under cold water and place on your forehead or the back of your neck.
- Some people find that pet cooling mats can be really helpful if they suffer from hot flushes at night. They can be placed under the bedsheets in a place where you can roll on to them when you are hot. These can be purchased from shops such as Kmart and The Warehouse.
- Keep your bedroom cool at night – have a window open or a fan close by.

Reduce the intensity and severity of the hot flushes

- Eat small, frequent meals rather than large meals.
- Cut down or cut out smoking as this can be a trigger for some women.
- Maintaining a healthy weight can reduce the frequency and severity of hot flushes.
- Exercise is known to help. Moderate intensity exercise helps by improving the body's ability to regulate temperature and keep cool.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and spicy foods, as these can trigger hot flushes.

Useful tips

- Keep a diary of the frequency and severity of the hot flushes, as this can help you to recognise any triggers. Add in notes about what you find helpful to use as a guide to managing hot flushes when they arise.
- Describe the frequency and severity of your symptoms to your GP or oncology team. They can come up with an individualised plan to help you. This is especially important if you have other symptoms or if it feels like your heart is racing during a hot flush.
- Talk to whānau and friends about the symptoms you are having, as they may have useful tips that worked for them. Sharing stories and experiences with others will give you more knowledge to better deal with these symptoms. Connecting with others on our app, mybc, is a great way to find valuable information and support from others who are experiencing the same symptoms.

Relaxation and complementary therapies

Complementary therapies can be used alongside standard and conventional breast cancer treatment to help alleviate some of the side effects caused by decreased levels of oestrogen. They are really beneficial for some women and can help to release stress and increase relaxation. The idea behind these therapies is that relaxation achieved through activities like meditation and mindfulness can reduce hot flushes, which can be exacerbated by the stress hormone cortisol.

Some complementary therapies are not recommended for women who have breast cancer. For example, a group of supplements known as phytoestrogens are not recommended for women who have oestrogen-positive cancers. This includes soy supplements and other substances that have similar effects on the body as oestrogen, but soy food products like soy milk are okay. As a general rule, it's important to tell your oncologist or GP if you are taking any over-the-counter supplements.

Can I take medication to stop hot flushes?

Some medications do help with the frequency and severity of hot flushes. These medications are generally used to treat other illnesses but are known to be very effective for managing menopausal symptoms. Our webinar on tamoxifen and aromatase inhibitors has useful information about managing menopausal side effects and medications during breast cancer treatment. You can find the webinar [here](#) . It's worth asking your oncologist or GP about taking medication if you're struggling to relieve symptoms. Possible medications include:

- Magnesium supplements - magnesium has been found to decrease the frequency and severity of hot flushes and also reduce the amount of abnormal sweating associated with a hot flushes. These can be obtained over-the-counter but talk to your doctor first.
- Some antidepressants, such as citalopram or paroxetine, can reduce the frequency and severity of hot flushes, as well as flushed skin.
- Gabapentin reduces the severity of hot flushes.
- Oxybutynin has been known to reduce the severity of night sweats.
- Clonidine patches reduce the frequency of hot flushes.
- Stellate ganglion block - is an injection of local anaesthetic into your neck which prevents flushing. This is currently only available in private clinics.



BCFNZ resources

Free webinars

- Complementing cancer treatment - This webinar looks at complementary therapies recommended for breast cancer treatment. [Watch the webinar.](#)
- Learning to love tamoxifen and AIs - This webinar looks at ways to cope with some of the more difficult side effects of hormone treatment for breast cancer. [Watch the webinar.](#)

Website information

- Management of menopausal symptoms - [View here.](#)
- Hormonal therapy - [View here.](#)
- Complementary therapies - [View here.](#)



Reach out for BCFNZ support

Counselling - it's free

Wherever you are in your breast cancer journey, counselling can help. BCFNZ funds three sessions either face-to-face, over the phone or via Skype. [Complete a self-referral.](#)

Mybc - Our online community

A place to connect and share experiences with others, to ask questions and to get support from a breast nurse. [Join mybc.](#)



For more information

0800 BC NURSE (0800 226 8773)
breastnurse@bcf.org.nz