

# Castleton Obstetrics → AND GYNECOLOGY ←

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## HOT FLASHES

### WHAT DO THEY FEEL LIKE?

Some women have very mild hot flashes that are nothing more than brief, warm flushes. Other women feel extreme heat, with sweating so intense that it requires a change of clothing. Most women find that hot flashes are worse around the time of the last menstrual cycle and for a few months afterward. Although every woman's experience is different, if you do have hot flashes, you will typically experience some or all of the following:

~ You may feel an aura, or warning, before a hot flash begins. This might be a "skin crawling" sensation, a feeling of anxiety, chest pressure, rapid heartbeat, headache, or a sense of pressure in your head. Or you may have no warning at all.

~ Next, you will feel a sensation of heat spreading from your chest to your head. You may feel a tingling sensation; the skin of your chest, neck and face may flush lightly or redden deeply, and you might feel lightheaded. The warmth and flushing may spread to other areas of your body. A hot flash, when accompanied by palpitations (rapid heartbeat), may feel like a panic attack.

~ After a few seconds or minutes, the flush will subside, and you may begin to sweat and feel chilled. A small number of women feel dizzy or faint as well. Although hot flashes usually last three to five minutes, they may be shorter or much longer. After the flushing is over, feeling such as headache, rapid heartbeat or anxiety will subside.

### WHAT ARE NIGHT SWEATS?

Night sweats are hot flashes that occur during sleep, with sweating that sometimes soaks clothing and sheets. These are the most severe types of hot flashes. If you have hot flashes often during the night, you're probably spending a lot of time changing clothing and sheets instead of sleeping. Disturbed sleep is not restful sleep. Over a period of time, you may become irritable, anxious and fatigued. Sleep disturbances can make you feel overwhelmed or unable to cope.

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### **WHEN WILL THEY BEGIN**

In your late 30's or early 40's, you may begin to feel some subtle changes in the temperature regulation of your body. You may simply notice that you get overheated more easily. You will probably experience your first hot flash in perimenopause, perhaps even before you notice any changes in your menstrual cycle. Your hot flashes may be mild and irregular at first, and they may become more intense and frequent as time goes on.

### **HOW OFTEN WILL I GET THEM?**

Some women never have them at all, while others may have them as often as every hour or even several times an hour, or as infrequently as once a week or once a month. Hot flashes are unpredictable and highly individual-each woman seems to follow her own pattern.

### **WHEN WILL THEY END?**

Most women have hot flashes for one or two years, beginning before menopause and ending within a year or so of the last menstrual period. About 25% will have them for five years or more, but very few women will still be having hot flashes ten years or longer after menopause.

### **HOW CAN SYMPTOMS OF HOT FLASHES BE RELIEVED?**

There are a number of ways to reduce the uncomfortable feelings associated with hot flashes. Some effective methods:

- ~ Avoid hot flash triggers
- ~ Wear lighter-weight clothing and dress in layers
- ~ Use a fan
- ~ Exercise regularly
- ~ Keep the bedroom cool when sleeping
- ~ Try stress-reducing activities such as biofeedback, massage, meditation, visualization or yoga
- ~ Try slow-breathing exercises

Try keeping a diary to find associations between hot flashes and possible triggers. Some examples include:

- ~ External sources of heat (for example, a hot shower, sitting near a campfire, or using a hair dryer)
- ~ Stress
- ~ Spicy foods
- ~ Hot foods or beverages
- ~ Alcohol
- ~ Caffeine

### **ARE THERE ANY TREATMENTS FOR HOT FLASHES?**

Over-the-counter, herbal remedies such as black cohosh (Remifemin®) may help relieve the discomfort of hot flashes. Remember that many women may choose to not treat their hot flashes, since they eventually disappear on their own.

Hot flashes can be treated effectively using prescription drugs that include:

- ~ Hormone or estrogen replacement therapy
- ~ Birth control pills
- ~ Antihypertensive (clonipin)
- ~ Low-dose antidepressants (Effexor®)