

# How to Outsmart a Hot Flash

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As a doctor and a women's health specialist, I love hot flashes. I like to see my patients happy and healthy; hot flashes help me accomplish both goals. Hot flashes bring women into my Midlife and Menopause Clinic where we treat symptoms of menopause and focus on disease prevention. The foundation of treatment is a healthy lifestyle. We take advantage of the opportunity and teach how healthy habits make hot flashes and night sweats disappear and prevent heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and stroke.

Let's clear up some basics. Menopause symptoms can start as early as thirty-nine and can last for five to eight years beyond the last period. Natural menopause is defined as absence of a period for twelve months. Surgical menopause is caused by removal of the ovaries. If during a hysterectomy the ovaries are left in place, menopause will happen naturally even as if the uterus had not been removed. Menopause is divided into two stages, early and late. Early menopause is the first five years, and late menopause lasts thereafter. Most symptoms occur in early menopause, but some women experience the symptoms much longer.

Menopause symptoms include hot flashes, night sweats, mood changes including anxiety, depression, or both, vaginal dryness, pain with intercourse, and bladder urgency. Also, many women have trouble losing weight especially from the belly fat region; many authors call this the 'meno-pot'. Some women also experience a decrease in sex drive and sleep difficulties.

Hot flashes occur because of a thermostat malfunction. Not the thermostat in your bedroom, but the one in your brain. We humans can control our body temperature except in menopause. The thermostat in your brain is set at 98.6 degrees. The thermostat is set to have a built-in comfort zone of about four degrees wherein your body does not react to temperature changes. Compare it to the thermostat in your living room. It could be set for seventy degrees, and if the sun streams in and heats the air, the room temperature heats up and the thermostat will trip the air conditioning to come on in order to get the room back into the comfort zone. A hot flash is your built-in air conditioning. If the windows in your living room are open, and the air cools to below sixty-eight degrees, the heat will come on. Shivers are your body's equivalent of a furnace. When all is well in your body, your thermostat is set to maintain a comfort zone of four degrees. When estrogen is low, the comfort zone is much smaller, around 0.5 degrees. Menopause causes your thermostat to have a small comfort zone, making you frequently too hot or too cold, rarely just right. Hence, hot flashes and night sweats can be a regular occurrence.

Low estrogen is not the only cause of hot flashes. The first line treatment for hot flashes and night sweats should be a healthy lifestyle. Many factors trigger hot flashes and night sweats other than low estrogen, and women can feel better with or without taking estrogen. I first learned this from patients who were on estrogen thinking they needed a higher dose because they were still experiencing



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hot flashes. Success comes down to the habits of everyday life. While estrogen keeps the thermostat calm, many things can trigger the air conditioning to activate—such as caffeine, hot beverages, alcohol, stress, a sudden burst of activity, over-dressing, sugar, and hypo-hydration. Treatment of hot flashes is not rocket science; it is about getting back to the basics.

To out-smart hot flashes, I came up with an easy-to-remember list of habits. I recommend these for everyday life. The list is called SEEDS™—or the Seven Essential Elements of Daily Success. Many patients have come to be believers, no matter what else they use for treatment and many with no other treatment at all. The SEEDS™ include

- Water: 80 NET oz. per day (total servings water minus caffeine minus alcohol)
- Sleep: 50 quality hours per week
- Micro-nutrients: multivitamin and Vitamin D
- Macro-nutrients: healthy balance of protein, smart carbohydrates, and fat and only one treat
- Exercise: including aerobic, strength-training, and stretching
- Fiber: 35 grams per day with healthy bowel habits
- Meditation or episode of gratitude, two times per day and to stop a hot flash or get back to sleep in the night

The most effective medical treatment for hot flashes and night sweats is estrogen replacement therapy. Even very low doses of estrogen can be effective, and the goal of Certified Menopause Practitioners (menopause.org) is to prescribe the lowest effective dose. The general rule of safe estrogen replacement therapy is women who qualify to take estrogen is ten years or less from menopause, do not have breast cancer or heart disease, and have not had

a stroke or blood clot in the legs or lungs. If the uterus is still present, the FDA-approved estrogen must be taken together with FDA-approved progesterone to protect from uterine cancer.

Some women cannot or choose not to take estrogen. There are other treatments including medications that are also used for depression and anxiety. They work because the medication effect occurs in the brain, where the thermostat is located. Several drugs in this class are used off-label, as in accepted but not FDA-approved for the indication, and recently one drug, Brisdelle® in this class was FDA-approved for hot flashes. Also, recently, there was a drug approved for vaginal dryness, Ospheña® which contains a SERM, which is a ‘selective estrogen receptor modulator’ in that it binds to the estrogen receptors in some areas of your body but not others and Duavee™ which contains estrogen and a SERM for hot flashes. All of these drugs have benefits as well as risks, and possible drug interactions and side effects. As with all medications, do your research and only obtain prescriptions from a health care provider who can provide full counseling and follow-up care.

Hot flashes bring women into the doctor’s office, even if they otherwise would not come. I enjoy taking the advantage of the opportunity to teach healthy habits with the goal of women feeling good, having improved quality of life, and also to confirm screening tests are done such as a mammogram, colonoscopy, and blood work. SEEDS™ make women feel better and are part of a lifestyle that could reduce risk for heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and stroke.

Remember, if you have hot flashes, you are not alone. Eighty percent of women experience hot flashes and night sweats, and thirty percent of women have consistent symptoms that affect daily life for years. Women who ‘do menopause well’ with fewer symptoms tend to be at a healthy weight, drink lots of water, and avoid triggers such as sugar and excess alcohol. To outsmart a hot flash, live healthy and consider treatments that are personalized and safe for you.

Dr. Bitner is board certified in obstetrics and gynecology and is a Certified Menopause Practitioner by the North American Menopause Society (NAMS). She received her medical degree from Wayne State University School of Medicine and completed her residency in obstetrics and gynecology at Spectrum Health/Butterworth Hospital. Dr. Bitner has special interests in women’s wellness, prevention of heart disease, menopause, libido, and minimally invasive surgery including daVinci robotic surgery.

