

WHAT MIDLIFE WOMEN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT Hormone Therapy Alternatives

Ever since the Women's Health Initiative demonstrated that hormone therapy was associated with health risks, many women and their clinicians have turned away from using estrogen or progesterone to relieve hot flashes. This rejection has left them looking for alternatives.

What are hot flashes?

The cause of this common phenomenon in midlife women is not yet clear—probably involving the thermoregulatory center in the brain, causing a small increase in body temperature. Episodes are usually accompanied by a rise in heart rate of as much as 20 beats a minute, feelings of intense heat (“like a sauna”), sweating, and flushing, often followed by shivering. About 10% to 25% of midlife women in North America suffer from hot flashes and night sweats during the menopause transition and beyond. These symptoms can be uncomfortable and sometimes even debilitating. They can last a couple of years, or many.

What is the standard therapy?

Hormone therapy (HT)—estrogen alone or estrogen with progesterone for women with a uterus—is the most effective, government-approved therapy for hot flashes. However, HT has been associated with some health risks such as increased risk of breast cancer and stroke, so many women and their clinicians are looking for alternative treatment.

Are there nonestrogen treatments?

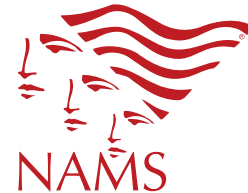
Nonmedical approaches for hot flash relief have mixed results. These include

Lifestyle changes that may help some women

- Identifying and avoiding hot flash triggers
- Dressing in removable layers
- Carrying a portable fan
- Applying ice or an evaporating product to the wrist or back of the neck when a hot flash starts
- Sleeping in a cool room with an ice pack under the pillow
- Using wicking bed linen and sleepwear
- Practicing yoga or paced respiration
- Adding soy to the diet

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Over-the-counter products

The safety and effectiveness of some of the hot flash “cures” and supplements such as red clover, black cohosh, and soy are not fully supported by science. These products are also not regulated by the government. New studies have shown that S-equol—a form of soy—might relieve hot flashes, but more research is needed. However, only 30% of American women can process this compound to derive benefit.

Prescription medicines used off label

Although no nonestrogen drug is yet government approved for hot flash relief, some are prescribed by clinicians anyway, and some are pending approval with the US Food and Drug Administration. These types of medications include

- Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor antidepressants (such as Paxil and Zoloft)
- Serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor antidepressants (such as Effexor and Pristiq)
- The anticonvulsants gabapentin and pregabalin (Serada and Lyrica)
- The antihypertensive clonidine (Catapres)

As with supplements, more research is needed to determine long-term effects, but studies show that these nonestrogen choices provide limited relief. Choosing the therapy for an individual woman may involve trial and error.

Where can I find more information about these alternative treatments?

Much menopause information, including HT alternatives, can be found at The North American Menopause Society website at www.menopause.org. Another good source is the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at <http://nccam.nih.gov/>.

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