Why Do I Still Have Hot Flashes in the Winter?

by AFRA WILLMORE

Managing Menopause in Cold Weather

Can you imagine checking the forecast so you can be prepared for how your menopause symptoms might change? After reading this you might be doing just that!

Though menopause is basically a result of changing hormone levels, one of the biggest menopause-related symptoms exacerbated by cold weather is hot flashes. You would think that cold weather would help cut down on the frequency of these hormone-related surges of heat and/or sweat, which can leave women feeling stressed and uncomfortable — but that is not the case.

The problem often arises when moving between extremes of temperature. For example: you've been out for a walk, working in the garden, or taking your children to school on a crisp autumn morning, then head indoors to a warmed room. Suddenly, a dreaded hot flash strikes and you find yourself red-faced and drenched.

Conversely, you might be out shopping for the winter holidays and a combination of popping in and out of overheated shops and the cold street could send your menopausal body into a spiral of confusion, all the while you're adding and removing layers of clothing in a bid to keep your body temperature stable.

Why Does This Happen?

Why does the body lose the ability to accurately maintain temperature during menopause anyway?

The root cause of hot flashes is not entirely clear, but scientists believe they are caused by the part of the brain that senses and controls body temperature (and other body functions) — the hypothalamus. This is a tiny but crucial area responsible for the production of many of the body's essential hormones. The hormones from the hypothalamus govern physiologic functions like temperature regulation, thirst, hunger, sleep, mood, sex drive and the release of other hormones within the body.

During menopause, estrogen levels fall. Scientists believe this fall in estrogen causes a glitch in the way the hypothalamus senses body temperature, making it think that you are too hot (or cold). When the hypothalamus thinks the body needs cooling it sends more blood to the skin (one of the causes of hot flushes and that attractive bright red face) and sweat glands start working overtime.

Not all women suffer with hot flashes. Some women entering perimenopause and menopause find their faulty internal thermostat simply causes them to feel cold. Not just "put on another sweater" cold, but a deep-seated chill that isn't relieved much by diving under a duvet or snuggling with a hot water bottle.

Next page: common triggers and tips for dealing with hot flashes

Why Does This Happen?

This can be especially difficult when the weather is actually cold — normal layers of clothing are just not enough. Some unfortunate women find that some areas of their body stay freezing cold while the rest of them feels volcanically hot. This might mean having a hot torso and face but icy cold hands and/or feet, or vice versa.

Do you find you have to stick your hot feet out of the duvet at night while the rest of your body is covered in goosebumps and you feel shivery? Or do you wear socks and lie on top of the duvet acting as a human hot water bottle? You are not alone.

One chat room thread online was between a large group of women whose bodies maintained appropriate temperatures according to the weather apart from their noses, which apparently always feel so cold they are painful. Many of them believed the menopause was to blame for this odd symptom — it certainly sounds like the pesky hypothalamus might be to blame.

Spicy food might be another trigger for hot or cold flashes and it could be that some people find this to be more of an issue in cold weather because they often choose to ditch the salads and eat more hot and spicy food on cooler days.

If you find there's a link for you between spicy treats and difficulty controlling your body temperature, the answer is simple (if a little sad if you love this type of cuisine): cut down on the spice or give up the spicy food altogether until your hormones have settled down!

Other advice is valid all year round. If you suffer from body temperature regulation issues leaving you too hot, too cold or too sweaty, dress in easily adjustable layers, drink plenty and eat a healthy diet.

If you have already worked out that overheated shops, theaters, underground travel networks or your workplace set off symptoms, carry an emergency bag with a wrap, scarf or cardigan and carry an insulated bottle containing a hot or cold drink.

Walking around during a hot flash might help shorten the attack, and of course if you feel cold, exercise can often warm you up.

Keep your home or workplace (if possible) at a reasonable temperature — don't crank the heating or air conditioning up too high — so you can avoid that extreme change when you go outside.

Chat to your doctor about the possibility of hormone replacement therapy. Or, if you would prefer to avoid medication, remember that this too will pass once your hormones settle down post-menopause.