Cold Flashes

by AFRA WILLMORE

The Other Side of the Coin

Almost everyone has heard of hot flashes during menopause, but a lesser-known side effect is cold flashes, which can leave women feeling chilly with cold feet and the shivers. I have experienced this phenomenon and not even realized it could be related to my fluctuating hormones!

I have odd sleeping habits, mainly as a hangover from seven pregnancies, each one with issues around getting comfortable. My midwife recommended sleeping with a pillow between my knees and this has developed into me sleeping with half my body resting on a beanbag-style V-pillow straightened out like a long bolster pillow. My husband calls it the Berlin Wall as it often ends up dividing the bed between us.

I like my body to be covered by the duvet but usually get too hot so have my legs from the knees down out of the covers. I would show you with a photograph but it's not a pretty sight!

This system of comfort and temperature control worked well for years until I noticed that my feet were getting colder and colder at night in particular. I tried putting them under the duvet but then the rest of my body got too hot. I hate the feel of wearing socks in bed so now my feet and legs are in-out-in-out of the covers all night in a bid to keep my temperature just right.

Thinking about it, I realized that my feet were also feeling colder during the day - I'm only really comfortable in fur-lined boots nowadays but they are generally neither elegant nor suitable for smarter outfits. Not that I let that stop me – sadly nowadays it's all about comfort over style when it comes to my feet!

Hormonal Changes

So what causes the cold flashes? You guessed it – hormones!

The main trigger of hot and cold flashes is thought to be a decreased level of estrogen. This affects the hypothalamus – the part of the brain that regulates body temperature. The hypothalamus becomes overactive and becomes less effective at reliably controlling body temperature.

With hot flashes the hypothalamus falsely detects an increase in body temperature, so it releases chemicals that dilate blood vessels near the skin and allow heat to be released for the body to cool down. The fluctuating hormone levels can cause women to experience hot flashes. It works the other way around to trigger body responses making women shiver.

Menopause cold flashes are rarer than hot flashes but can last for minutes, hours, or even days for an unfortunate few.

You know it's menopause-related and not illness-related or situational when you find yourself shivering or

sweating regularly when everyone else is either in T-shirts or winter woollies.

I've said it before and I'll say it again – the easiest way to cope with these odd and unpredictable symptoms is to dress in layers of natural fabrics. I always carry a fold up bag in my handbag so when I feel the need to strip off I can load my scarf, cardigan and jacket into it until the chills hit, when I can pile my layers back on again.

It's like a horrid and lengthy version of the "dress up relay race," a favourite at my children's sports day where they run, pausing at intervals to put on hats, coats and gloves.

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Triggers and Coping

Apparently cold weather, cold drinks and emotional turmoil can trigger cold flashes, but often it is simply down to the hormonal changes during the years leading up to menopause (known as peri-menopause) and during the menopause.

Most women find the flashes, hot or cold, diminish and disappear completely in the five years after the official menopause (defined as when a woman has not had a period for 12 months) but for some the symptoms carry on beyond. I am more than 12 months past my last period but still have the occasional hot flash - generally triggered by stress it seems.

It's always worth getting persistent symptoms checked out by a doctor – chills and cold feet can be caused by thyroid problems or poor blood circulation, which can be down to a number of medical conditions.

HRT is an effective treatment for body temperature regulation, or you could talk to your doctor about other medications, which might help reduce cold or hot flashes.

Dull but true – a well-balanced diet, regular exercise, and increasing consumption of water are all ways to help reduce menopause symptoms and during a cold flash, it might help to get up and move around to increase blood circulation, or head for a hot bath, snuggle up in a blanket or slip on cosy slippers.

And don't be afraid to talk about your symptoms. I always make a joke as I strip off – and have found other women often share their experiences. It always helps to know you are not alone and sharing your experience might just help another woman who is worrying silently about what is happening in her changing body.