NHS

Royal Cornwall Hospitals

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Menopausal symptoms after hormone sensitive cancers

Information for patients

Outstanding Care for **One+All**

What is the menopause?

This is when you stop ovulating and your periods stop. The average age in the UK is 51. Perimenopause is the time when your symptoms start until your periods stop. Post menopause is the time after your periods stop. Symptoms can continue for several years after this. Menopause can occur naturally or be caused by cancer treatments.

Many different symptoms can be experienced during these stages. These can include:

- hot flushes and night sweats (also known as 'vasomotor symptoms'). These are very common (80% of women)
- anxiety and/or low mood
- memory problems and brain fog
- vaginal dryness and soreness
- urine infections
- loss of interest in sex
- joint aches and pains
- sleep disturbance
- reduced bone density (osteopaenia and osteoporosis).

Many women will have mild symptoms and can manage with lifestyle measures alone. Some have more severe symptoms requiring treatment.

Can I take HRT?

If you have had a hormone-sensitive cancer, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is usually not advised. This includes HRT tablets, patches, gels, or sprays. This is because HRT may increase the risk of the cancer coming back.

If you have severe symptoms, you may need to find alternatives to HRT to help.

General advice

- Wear layers of clothing in natural fabrics.
- Weight loss may help to improve vasomotor symptoms.
- A healthy, varied diet is important for prevention of chronic disease generally. A good diet is rich in vegetables, fruits and fibre and low in processed food and red meats.
- Stopping smoking and reducing your alcohol intake can help reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis. Further advice on stopping or cutting down is available from your GP surgery.
- Exercise is a good antidepressant, helps sleep, reduces the risk of cancer coming back and is good for overall health.
- There are a variety of treatments that can be tried, and it is worth trying for a few months to see if they work for you. A combination of treatments may each give small benefits which add up to help improve overall symptoms.

Vasomotor symptoms (flushes and sweats)

Psychological therapies

- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** – developed specifically for menopausal symptoms, this can help manage hot flushes and night sweats. It has been found to be effective in three clinical trials for women going through the menopause and for breast cancer patients. Benefits were maintained at six months, and there were additional benefits to quality of life. CBT focuses on stress and wellbeing, hot flushes, night sweats and sleep problems. It is available as a self-help book (Managing hot flushes and night sweats: a cognitive behavioural approach to menopause, by Myra Hunter and Melanie Smith) and as a 6-week face to face group course.

Medication

- **SSRIs and SNRIs** – such as citalopram, venlafaxine. These are antidepressant medications, which can reduce vasomotor symptoms by 50-70%. It is worth trying another one if the first one does not seem effective for you. Some can interfere with the action of tamoxifen. Duloxetine can have the additional benefit of helping with joint pains.
  They can all potentially affect sexual function (libido and ability to orgasm), which may persist after stopping the medication. They can have other side effects which usually settle within the first few weeks, such as nausea.
- **Mirtazepine** – also an antidepressant but can be useful for sleep problems as well as vasomotor symptoms.

- **Oxybutinin** – this is usually given for an overactive bladder but can be effective in reducing hot flushes when used in small doses. It can have some side effects such as dry mouth and eyes, or constipation.
- **Gabapentin and Pregabalin** – these are usually used for nerve pain but can be effective for vasomotor symptoms. Pregabalin is licensed for use in anxiety disorder so can be useful if this is also a consideration. They can have side effects in the form of dry mouth, tiredness, weight gain and dizziness.

Herbal remedies and supplements

- **Pollen extract such as Femal** – this has been found to help with hot flushes and difficulty sleeping in some studies. In Femal the outer shell is removed, reducing the risk of allergic reactions, making it suitable for people with hayfever. It can take up to 8 weeks for effects to be felt.
- **Sage** – this is thought to have some oestrogen like activity. Though it can work for some women, it should be avoided in hormone positive breast cancers.

Anxiety and low mood

Lifestyle

- Exercise
- Yoga (can also help with joint pains and fatigue)
- A diet rich in plant variety and low in processed foods

Psychological Therapies

- Counselling – available via your GP surgery or The Cove
- Mindfulness – apps such as Headspace or Calm can be useful

Medication

- Antidepressants

Herbal Remedies and Supplements

- Magnesium threonate can help with anxiety.

Joint aches and pains

Lifestyle

- Yoga
- Exercise – has been proven to reduce pain severity and pain scores.

Medication

- Joint pain is a common side effect of aromatase inhibitors (letrozole, anastrozole, exemestane). Discuss any possible medication changes with your specialist.
- Duloxetine – an antidepressant which can also help with vasomotor symptoms.

Herbal remedies and supplements

- **Turmeric (Pomi-T)** – this contains pomegranate fruit powder, green tea leaf, turmeric and broccoli. This supplement can help with mood, joint aches and hot flushes. It can interfere with warfarin and other cancer medications so please check with your doctor before starting.

Complementary therapies

- Acupuncture – weekly for 6 weeks has been shown to reduce joint pain in women taking aromatase inhibitors and can also help hot flushes, sleep and mood.

Sleep disturbance

Lifestyle

- Exercise can be helpful – avoid late in the evening when it can have the opposite effect.
- Sleep hygiene – avoid alcohol and caffeine, no screens/TV for an hour before bed, a warm bath or shower can all help get the body ready for sleep.

Psychological therapies

- Counselling – helps anxiety and depression, which can be associated with sleep disturbance.
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is proven to work effectively in a range of research trials.
- Apps such as Sleepio – a self-help programme based on CBT.

Medication

- Mirtazepine – an antidepressant that can aid sleep in low doses. It can also be effective for vasomotor symptoms.

Herbal remedies and supplements

- Magnesium glycinate has been shown to aid sleeping difficulties.

Vaginal dryness and sexual dysfunction

Vaginal dryness and other related symptoms are common around and after the menopause and can also be made worse by cancer treatments.

Some breast cancer treatments reduce oestrogen levels in the body or block its effect. Oestrogen helps to keep the vulva and vagina moisturised and supple. Low oestrogen can cause dryness, soreness and irritation and can lead to discomfort during intimacy and sex as well as urinary symptoms.

Medication

- **Vaginal moisturisers** – these can help prevent vaginal dryness, especially when started at the same time as aromatase inhibitors. Can be used 2 to 3 times a week. We would recommend Yes or other products based on hyaluronic acid.
- **Vitamin E** capsules can be pierced and the oil used on the vulva and vagina.
- **Vulval moisturisers** eg Epaderm. Use an ointment rather than a cream that can cause sensitivity.
- **Vaginal lubricants** – water or oil-based products to help comfort during sex and intimacy. Oil based products can damage condoms.
- **Vaginal oestrogen** – can be used in some women after breast cancer and is very effective to help with soreness and dryness. Very little is absorbed into the bloodstream.
- **Ospemiphene** – an oral tablet that can be used if the vulva or vagina is too sore for topical treatments. It is only licensed for women who have finished all breast cancer treatments.

Sex and intimacy

- Sex and intimacy, masturbation and the use of vibrators, if comfortable, are all good for vulval and vaginal health as they improve blood flow and help maintain elasticity. An Ohnut is a soft buffer ring that can be used on the penis to limit the depth of penetration. Silicone dilators can be used to help gradually stretch and relax the vaginal tissues.

Physiotherapy

- This can help relax the pelvic floor, which can help reduce discomfort during sex and intimacy.

Bone health

- Osteoporosis is a condition where your bones lose strength, making you more likely to fracture (break) a bone – even after just a minor bump or fall.
- Bone strength (density) is at its maximum in your 30's and gradually reduces over time. Certain things make this happen more rapidly, such as smoking, alcohol, an early menopause and aromatase inhibitors (anastrozole, letrozole and exemestane). Oestrogen is important in maintaining bone density but there are other treatments and lifestyle measures that can help if you have had a hormone dependent cancer.

Lifestyle

- It is important to have a good diet with adequate calcium and vitamin D. Vitamin D helps the body absorb and use calcium. It can be taken as a supplement, but it is also in oily fish, eggs and is made by the body in the presence of sunlight. Calcium rich foods include dairy products, nuts, sardines and green leafy vegetables. Use an online calculator to see if you are having enough calcium in your diet.
- Exercise is important for bone health. The best way to keep bones strong is to do both weight-bearing impact and muscle-strengthening exercises. Examples of weight bearing exercise are walking, stair climbing, marching, racket sports, running and star jumps (depending on your level of fitness).

Medication

- Bisphosphonates work by slowing down the cells that break down bone. They reduce the risk of fracture in the spine by 60% and in the hip by up to 50%. They are taken weekly as a tablet (eg alendronate) or 6 monthly as an injection (zoledronate or zoledronic acid). They carry on working for months after the treatment has finished.

Further information

The Royal Osteoporosis Society

- www.theros.org.uk/

Calcium Calculator

- www. webapps.igc.ed.ac.uk/world/research/rheumatological/calcium-calculator/

Women's Health Concern (for menopause advice)

- www.womens-health-concern.org/

Breast Cancer Now

- www.breastcancernow.org/

Books

Managing Hot Flushes and Night Sweats: A Cognitive Behavioural Self-help Guide to the Menopause by Melanie Smith and Myra Hunter

The Complete Guide to the Menopause: Your Toolkit to Take Control and Achieve Life-Long Health Paperback by Annice Mukherjee

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