



FACTSHEET



information on **living with breast cancer**

Understanding and managing menopausal symptoms

This factsheet is for women who are having menopausal symptoms after breast cancer treatment. Some breast cancers are stimulated to grow by high levels of oestrogen in the body. Therefore many treatments aim to reduce or block the effects of oestrogen, causing menopausal symptoms. These symptoms can occur as a side effect of Chemotherapy, hormone therapy or ovarian ablation. The symptoms are discussed here and there is some practical advice provided on how to manage them.

WHAT IS THE MENOPAUSE?

The menopause occurs when a woman's menstrual cycle (periods) stops and she can no longer have children. It is often called the change of life. The average age for menopause in women is 52 years. Menopausal symptoms occur because the female hormones progesterone and oestrogen are produced in smaller amounts by the body. Oestrogen is mainly produced

in the ovaries and is involved in the development and growth of breast tissue. It also affects women's physical and emotional health. Menopausal symptoms, including hot flushes, night sweats, generalised aches and pains, palpitations, vaginal dryness, lower sex drive, mood swings, poor concentration and other conditions, can be quite severe in some women and very mild

in other women. Some women may experience anxiety and depression and it may be hard to work out if this is a menopausal symptom or due to a recent diagnosis of breast cancer.

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WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Hot flushes

Hot flushes can vary from being a mild sensation of warming, affecting only the face to being an extremely unpleasant feeling which affects the whole body and causes heavy perspiration. Usually, these flushes become less severe over time but for some women they can be long lasting.

Some women also feel their heartbeat racing (palpitations) or develop a sense of anxiety.

- Wear cotton clothing in layers. Cotton absorbs moisture and layering allows you to remove clothing as your body temperature changes.
- Use several layers of natural bedclothes that can be removed as needed.
- Use sprays or moist wipes to help lower your skin temperature.
- Aromatherapy oils, such as cooling peppermint or relaxing lavender, may be added to the spray.
- Avoid warm areas and use an electric fan to lower your skin temperature.
- Keep a record of your hot flushes to see if there is a pattern or an association with an item such as a particular place or food, especially spicy food.
- Avoid hot baths or showers as they may trigger a hot flush.
- Drinking cool drinks can also help.

Physical activity

Regular exercise produces a sense of well-being by encouraging the body to produce natural chemicals called endorphins. Exercise is good for your heart, and weight-bearing exercises such as walking will help maintain bone strength.

Nutrition

You may find it helpful to avoid certain foods and drinks such as spicy foods, caffeine, alcohol, sugar and hot drinks. If you are overweight, losing weight can reduce your symptoms.

Vaginal dryness

Low oestrogen levels can result in vaginal dryness and irritation. Wearing loose fitting cotton underwear and loose-fitting trousers can help. Vaginal moisturisers such as Replens (available from chemists) may be used every few days. If you experience discomfort during sexual intercourse, water based lubricants such as KY-gel can be used

Mood swings

You may find that you are experiencing extreme mood swings from very happy to very sad. These can happen unexpectedly and for no apparent reason. Relaxation classes, meditation, yoga and similar activities can be a useful way of controlling mood swings. Sometimes joining a support group where you can talk to other women with similar experiences can help. If you find you cannot cope with your mood swings talk to your doctor

or breast care nurse. They may refer you to a counsellor or therapist who can help.

Decreased sex drive

Breast cancer can affect a person's sex drive for many reasons. It may be a result of the diagnosis itself, treatment or side effects or be related to body image. Talk to your GP as there are things that may help.

Relaxation

Many women find that reducing stress can help make their symptoms less severe. This can be different things for different people, it may be learning to become calmer, taking up a stress relieving activity such as Yoga, Tai Chi or meditation or simply increasing rest.

NON-PRESCRIPTION INTERVENTIONS

The following items do not require a prescription. However, you should not take any of the preparations listed below without discussing them with your cancer specialist or GP.

Vitamin and mineral supplements

Vitamin E, selenium and vitamin B6 have provided relief for some women. Calcium and vitamin D supplements can help strengthen bones. Never take more than the recommended dose of supplements.

Evening Primrose Oil

Many women find evening primrose oil helpful. It may take many months before any improvement is noticed.



Phyto-oestrogens (plant oestrogens)

Phyto-oestrogens are thought to relieve menopausal symptoms by mimicking the effects of oestrogen in the body. They are found in most soya foods, especially soya beans, linseed, whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

No clinical trials have been conducted on phyto-oestrogens so it is unknown if they could increase the risk of your cancer coming back. It is important to discuss any herbal supplements with your cancer specialist or breast care nurse before taking them.

Complementary therapies

Many women use a range of complementary therapies to reduce the symptoms of menopause. These therapies include acupuncture, reflexology, massage, meditation, aromatherapy and homeopathic and herbal remedies. If you decide to use complementary therapies, it is important that you go to a recognised, qualified practitioner. Always discuss complementary therapies with your cancer specialist or GP before starting any therapy

THERAPIES THAT REQUIRE A PRESCRIPTION

HRT (Hormone replacement therapy)

HRT replaces the hormones that are no longer being produced by the ovaries. This is a very effective way of relieving menopausal symptoms. However, women with a history of breast cancer should try other

treatments to relieve symptoms before trying HRT. For more information on HRT please call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on Freefone 1800 30 90 40.

Anti-depressant drugs

There is some evidence that the anti-depressant drugs venlafaxine and fluoxetine can be effective in controlling hot flushes for some women.

Clonidine

This drug, mainly used to control high blood pressure, has been shown to be effective in reducing both the number and intensity of hot flushes.

Low dose progesterone

Progesterone in low doses is effective in relieving hot flushes. Megestrol (Megace) and medroxyprogesterone (provera) are the most common drugs prescribed.

Gabapentin (Nerontin)

Some women have found gabapentin, an anti-epilepsy drug, helpful in reducing the severity of hot flushes. You doctor will discuss the possible benefits and side effects with you.

Other medications

Postmenopausal osteoporosis is a condition that is caused by low levels of oestrogen. It causes bones to become brittle and may result in fractures (broken bones). Selective oestrogen receptor modulators (SERMs), such as raloxifene are used to try to prevent osteoporosis. They do not lessen the other

symptoms of menopause.

Bisphosphonates are also used to try and prevent osteoporosis but again do not relieve other menopausal symptoms

FURTHER SUPPORT

It is entirely natural to experience strong feelings as a result of a diagnosis of breast cancer, and in reaction to treatment side effects. However, if you find that you are unable to cope with mood changes or if you are feeling 'down' for prolonged periods, try talking to your GP or breast care nurse.

You may find it helpful to share your feelings with someone who has had breast cancer. Reach to Recovery is a programme set up to help and support women who have recently had a breast cancer diagnosis. The programme works on the principle of personal contact between the patient and a Reach to Recovery volunteer - a woman who has had a breast cancer diagnosis. Carefully selected and fully trained volunteers are available to provide practical information and reassurance at a time when a woman is most in need of both.

For more information on individual support or support groups in your area, call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on Freefone 1800 30 90 40.



HELP FROM ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, provides breast cancer information and support and funds breast cancer research. Our services are free, confidential and accessible.

For more information call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freefone 1800 30 90 40 or visit www.cancer.ie/action

OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Action Breast Cancer
43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
Freefone Helpline:
1800 30 90 40
Email: abc@irishcancer.ie

Irish Cancer Society
43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4.
Freefone Helpline:
1800 200 700
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie
Website: www.cancer.ie

Quinn Healthcare
Mill House, Fermoy, Co. Cork,
Phone: 1890 700890
Email:
info@quinn-healthcare.com
Website:
www.quinn-healthcare.com

Reach to Recovery
43–45 Northumberland Road,
Ballsbridge, Dublin 4
Freefone Helpline:
1800 30 90 40

Voluntary Health Insurance

VHI House
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1.
Callsave: 1800 44 44 44
Email: info@vhi.ie
Website: www.vhi.ie

Hibernian Healthcare

Po Box 764, Freepost, Togher,
Co. Cork.
Phone: 1850 716 666
Email: support@hibernianhealthinsurance.ie
Website: www.hibernian.ie

Action Breast Cancer

43 - 45 Northumberland
Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4
Freefone: 1800 30 90 40

USEFUL WEBSITES

Irish Cancer Society
www.cancer.ie
Breast Cancer Care UK
www.breastcancercare.org.uk
American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org

**The Susan G. Komen
Foundation**
www.komen.org

Europa Donna
www.cancereurope.org/europadonna

Cancer Backup
www.cancerbackup.org.uk

Breast Cancer
www.breastcancer.org

Lymphodema Ireland
www.lymphireland.com

ABC – ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, is the leading provider of breast cancer information and support in Ireland. Each year we reach over 25,000 women who are concerned about breast cancer or breast health. Our services are free and include:

- **National Breast Cancer Helpline** 1800 30 90 40 – staffed by specialist cancer nurses.
- **Patient care programmes** – providing emotional support and practical assistance for those living with breast cancer.
- **Health Promotion** – providing community and workplace programmes on breast awareness and leading a healthy lifestyle.
- **Advocacy** – providing a voice for those affected by breast cancer in Ireland.
- **Professional support** – complementing the services offered by those caring for breast cancer patients.
- **Research** – funding vital Irish research that will have a significant impact on the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

ABC is funded entirely by donations from the public. If you would like to support our work or make a donation please contact us.

action
breast
cancer

a programme of
irish cancer society

Freefone Helpline
1800 30 90 40

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