How to Manage Hot Flashes Caused by Cancer Therapy

Doctors recommend several ways to treat this common side effect of hormone therapy.

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While hormone therapy is used to treat cancer and ease symptoms, it also causes side effects such as hot flashes, or sudden feelings of warmth that result in sweating and anxiety. But these unpleasant episodes can be treated and prevented, suggests a new resource for patients available for free online in JAMA Oncology, reports Reuters.

Hot flashes may occur occasionally, daily or even several times a day. What’s more, they can negatively affect a person’s sleep.

“It’s important to let your physician know so we can talk about it and what’s really causing these troubling symptoms,” said Arjun Gupta, MD, of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, who wrote the patient-information fact sheet. “They affect quality of life, and we want to help patients if this is really bothering them.”

Before turning to medication, doctors usually make other recommendations. Gupta has drawn several suggestions from the American Society of Clinical Oncology’s patient information resource for preventing and treating hot flashes.

He advises patients to document the number, intensity and duration of their hot flashes as well as make lifestyle changes. These include quitting smoking, limiting caffeine and alcohol intake and avoiding hot baths and spicy foods, which can trigger hot flashes.

Cool environments, cotton clothing and sheets, and cool showers can be helpful as can relaxation activities such as yoga, meditation and breathing exercises.

According to Charles Loprinzi, MD, of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, hot flashes can be managed for both men and women with low doses of antidepressants, such as venlafaxine, citalopram, clonidine, gabapentin and oxybutynin.

“In our studies, we’ve found that the treatment of hot flashes in women who have breast cancer is largely unrelated to the fact that they have breast cancer,” said Loprinzi. “The nonhormonal treatments seem to have the same efficacy for everyone.”
It is rare that hot flashes as a result of cancer treatment will lead to a change in dosage or a discontinuation of therapy, says Gupta. He also advises those interested in alternative therapies for hot flashes to talk to their doctors.

Click here to learn more about how to manage cancer treatment side effects.