



Bristol Menopause
& Wellwoman Clinic

Managing Menopause With a History of Breast Cancer





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Managing Menopausal Symptoms

Menopausal symptoms are common in women undergoing or recovering from breast cancer treatment. Treatments such as chemotherapy and endocrine therapy (e.g., tamoxifen or aromatase inhibitors) can induce or worsen menopausal symptoms, sometimes making them more severe than natural menopause. Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is often contraindicated because of the risk of cancer recurrence, particularly for those who have had oestrogen receptor positive cancers. Managing these symptoms requires a personalised approach, often involving a menopause specialist and the oncology team.

This leaflet provides practical advice on non-hormonal ways to manage menopause symptoms, including lifestyle changes, dietary adjustments, supplements, prescribed medications, and emotional support.

Lifestyle Options:

Simple lifestyle changes can help improve menopausal symptoms:

- Avoid smoking and alcohol - This can reduce hot flushes, lower heart disease risk, and strengthen bones.
- Clothing and diet - Wear light, layered cotton clothing and avoid caffeine/spicy foods to manage hot flushes.
- Gel packs - Cool packs and cooling gel pillows can reduce the severity of hot flushes and night sweats when they occur.
- Avoid triggers - keep a diary of symptoms to identify triggers, particularly for hot flushes. Alcohol and spicy foods are common reported triggers that could be avoided.

Exercise:

- Weight-bearing exercises - Weight-bearing exercise refers to any physical activity that forces your bones and muscles to work against gravity, helping to strengthen bones, improve muscle mass, and support joint health. These exercises are especially important during menopause, as they help maintain bone density and reduce the risk of osteoporosis. This can include resistance exercise (weights, lunges, squats), low impact aerobics (walking, climbing stairs) or high impact exercise (running, hiking or dancing).
- Cardiovascular exercise is exercise that raises your heart rate and gets you out of breath like running and swimming. It is important during menopause to support metabolism, manage weight, and reduce the risk of heart disease. It also manages symptoms and improves mood, sleep, and sex drive.
- Yoga, Pilates, and Tai Chi These gentle exercises improve flexibility and help with joint aches and mood symptoms in the menopause



Nutrition:

A healthy diet can help reduce weight gain, menopausal symptoms, and heart disease risk:

Diet: Aim for a varied with plenty of:

- fruits and vegetables
- healthy proteins like white meat and pulses/legumes
- good fats like those in nuts, seeds and oily fish
- high-fibre foods.

Low salt and sugar intake to help prevent high blood pressure and diabetes. This is particularly important when the cardioprotective effects of oestrogen are reduced after menopause.

Low-fat, plant-based diet - Some studies have shown that this diet can reduce menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes and fatigue as effectively as HRT.

Managing Sleep & Insomnia

- Sleep hygiene: Establish a consistent sleep schedule by going to bed and waking up at the same time daily, even on weekends. Create a relaxing bedtime routine, such as reading or taking a warm bath, and keep your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet to promote restful sleep. Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and heavy meals close to bedtime, as these can disrupt sleep. Regular physical activity during the day can also help, but avoid vigorous exercise in the evening.
- CBTi (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia) - Another targeted CBT that has been proven to help with insomnia and improve quality of sleep
- Magnesium Glycinate - Supports sleep quality. This type of magnesium is well absorbed and promotes GABA receptors in the brain which supports relaxation. Magnesium is also thought to support the production of melatonin which is important for your body's natural sleep-wake cycle. The amino acid glycine is also thought to have a calming effect on the body and therefore help in falling and staying asleep.
- Melatonin - Melatonin is a natural hormone produced by the body which regulates the sleep-wake cycle and slowly decreases with age. Some people find taking a melatonin supplement helpful to improve their sleep.



Supplements & Remedies

Supplements and herbal remedies may help alleviate menopausal symptoms for some women although there is not strong research evidence. They are available over-the-counter and can be trialed for 12 weeks to see if there is any improvement in symptoms. The following supplements are thought to be safe in patients with a history of breast cancer:

- **Vitamin D and Calcium** - These are important to maintain bone strength. Vitamin D can only be made when the skin is exposed to sunlight. It can also be found in eggs, oily fish and is often added to cereals and plant milks. A supplement of Vitamin D: 400-1000 units is recommended for people who will have difficulty with getting enough exposure to sunlight.
- **Calcium** - Our main source of calcium is in our diet, through dairy foods like milk, cheese and yogurt but also from tofu and leafy greens. If you use alternative milks (like soy and oat) make sure they are fortified with calcium. You can use a calcium calculator to work out if you are getting enough calcium in your diet and if a supplement is needed.
- **Omega 3** - Can help with joint pain, bone strength, and hot flush frequency. Oily fish, nuts, seeds, spinach, eggs are good sources of Omega 3.
- **Magnesium Glycinate** - Can support bone health and has also been found to help with sleep and mood. Magnesium can be found in dark chocolate, nuts, seeds, leafy greens.
- **Femal** - A purified pollen extract that has been shown to help with hot flushes and sleep. It can take 2 months for the effects to be felt and needs to be taken every day (one capsule)
- **Turmeric (Pomi-T)** The Pomi-T supplement is a vegan supplement that may help with mood, joint aches and hot flushes. One study showed 80% of people reported an improvement in symptoms when they take 2 capsules per day.
- **Vitamin E** - This is a fat-soluble vitamin that acts as an antioxidant, protecting cells from the damage of free radicals. It improves immune function and prevents clots from forming. It is found in foods such as plant-based oils (wheat germ or sunflower), hazelnuts and almonds, sunflower seeds, vegetables (like spinach or broccoli) and kiwi or mango fruit. Vitamin E may reduce how severe and how often hot flushes occur. It can also be used in the vagina to improve dryness.



Supplements & Remedies

The following supplements are not suitable for people with a history of breast cancer as they may have oestrogen-like effects or interfere with common medication used after breast cancer.

- Isoflavones
- Black Cohosh
- Red clover
- Agnus Castus
- St John's Wort
- Evening Primrose & Starflower Oil
- Ginseng

Complementary Therapies

- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). There is good evidence that targeted CBT can help with hot flushes, mood and sleep. CBT does not directly affect hormone levels but helps change responses to symptoms like hot flashes and night sweats. It teaches relaxation techniques, stress management strategies, and cognitive reframing to reduce the distress caused by these symptoms. CBT is typically delivered over 4-6 sessions, either individually or in group settings. It can also be accessed through self-help books or online programs
- Mindfulness – Practising mindfulness, meditation and yoga can help with stress and wellbeing.
- Acupuncture – some people find acupuncture can help improve hot flushes, sleep, and mood.

Prescribed Medication

SNRIs and SSRIs

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) are commonly prescribed antidepressants that can also help manage menopause symptoms, especially vasomotor symptoms such as hot flashes and night sweats and mood symptoms. These can be safely used in women who have had breast cancer. However, there are certain SSRIs (paroxetine and fluoxetine) that may reduce the efficacy of tamoxifen.

During menopause, declining estrogen levels can disrupt the hypothalamus, the brain's temperature control center. This leads to vasomotor symptoms like hot flashes and night sweats. SSRIs and SNRIs adjust the levels of neurotransmitters (serotonin and norepinephrine), which help widen the "thermoneutral zone" in the brain, reducing these symptoms.



Prescribed Medication

These medications are typically prescribed at lower doses for menopause symptoms than for depression and can take up to 4 weeks to have an effect.

Neurokinin-3 (NK3) receptor antagonists (Fezolinetant)

Fezolinetant is a new non-hormonal medication developed to treat the hot flushes and night sweats associated with menopause. It works by targeting a specific receptor in the body known as the neurokinin-3 (NK3) receptor. Fezolinetant is not contraindicated in women with a history of breast cancer, however, there are no studies involving women with breast cancer taking fezolinetant and it should therefore be used with caution. Monitoring bloods are required when starting this medication as it can rarely cause injury to the liver.

Vaginal Dryness Treatments

- Vaginal moisturisers are designed to provide long-lasting hydration to the vaginal tissues. They help improve tissue elasticity, integrity, and lubrication by adhering to the vaginal walls. Moisturisers need to be used regularly to be effective, usually 1-3 times a week. Using moisturisers at bedtime is recommended for maximum effect.
- Lubricants – Lubricants provide temporary relief from friction during sexual activity, reducing pain (dyspareunia) and discomfort.
- Yes! And Sylk are both recommended for sensitive skin. Yes! Lubricants are not compatible with polyurethane condoms and oil based moisturisers should be avoided with all condoms as they may interfere with their effectiveness.
- Vitamin E – May help when applied vaginally. A pierced vitamin E gel capsule can be inserted directly into the vagina or the gel squeezed onto the finger before applying to the vulva.
- Vaginal Oestrogen – Cream, tablet, pessary, or ring. There is growing evidence that local oestrogen therapies are safe to use for women who have had breast cancer due to their low level of systemic absorption. Large studies have found no significant increase in breast cancer recurrence among women using vaginal estrogen therapy, including those with estrogen receptor-positive breast cancer. However, these are still contraindicated for women taking Aromatase Inhibitors (e.g. Letrozole)



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