

WOMEN'S
HEALTH

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Summer, Sleep & Hot Flushes

Your menopause festival season survival guide

Summer is the season of long social evenings, festivals, holidays and regatta. But for many women in perimenopause and menopause, summer can also magnify symptoms already simmering beneath the surface.

Hot flushes feel hotter, sleep becomes lighter and more fragmented, and anxiety can creep in after busy social weekends. Even favourite summer clothes can suddenly feel uncomfortable or irritating.

Whilst awareness around menopause has improved hugely in recent years, many women are understandably tired of being told to simply “drink less”, “stress less” or “just keep cool”.

This month, I want to help you understand why symptoms often worsen during warmer months, and which strategies are genuinely evidence-based and can make a meaningful difference, without taking the joy out of summer.

WHY HEAT SUDDENLY FEELS UNBEARABLE

Our body temperature is controlled in an area of the brain called the hypothalamus. Here, hormones and signals work together to keep our temperature within a relatively narrow range (thermoregulation). Oestrogen plays an important role in this process.

As oestrogen levels fluctuate and decline during perimenopause and menopause, thermoregulation becomes disrupted. The brain interprets even small temperature changes as overheating, causing blood vessels to dilate (vasodilation), bringing heat to the skin surface which is why you may

experience increased skin flushing and warmth. Skin pores open and heart rate can increase, which explains why a hot flush can feel surprisingly intense and physically draining.

But this is not the end of the story. The body then launches a rapid cooling response, where sweat glands activate to remove heat, leading to perspiration and why many women experience sweats and sudden chills after flushes.

Add a heatwave, crowded festival, packed regatta marquee or poor sleep into the mix, and symptoms can escalate quickly.

COOL SMARTER, WITHOUT THE SPENDING SPREE

One of the biggest changes in the menopause space over recent years has been the explosion of products marketed to exhausted women looking for a quick fix — “menopause” cooling pillows, duvets, sprays and supplements, to name just a few.

Some are harmless, many overpriced, and only a small number have genuinely solid evidence behind them.

The most effective cooling strategies are usually far simpler and make complete sense once you understand how the body responds to heat.

Rather than trying to cool the entire body, focus on areas rich in surface blood vessels such as the hands, feet, scalp, neck, and underarms. Cooling these areas helps dissipate heat more efficiently. Cold water on the feet or wrists, reusable cool packs, portable fans and water sprays can all help interrupt a flush before it escalates.

Interestingly, research also suggests that breathable natural fabrics genuinely matter. Bamboo and moisture-wicking clothing can reduce heat retention and skin irritation. This is particularly relevant for underwear and nightwear, as many women experience vulvovaginal irritation, urinary symptoms or increased skin sensitivity during menopause. Breathable fabrics help reduce moisture, friction and overheating, creating a less favourable environment for irritation and bacteria to thrive.

We often focus purely on external heat, but many hot flush triggers are internal too. Spicy foods, alcohol and caffeine can all trigger vasodilation, increasing flushing and sweating. Stress has a similar physiological effect, increasing heart rate and activating heat and sweat receptors.

Even digestion itself generates heat. Large meals high in sugar and processed carbohydrates require more metabolic energy to process, producing additional internal heat. Lighter meals with protein, fibre and hydration can help stabilise energy and reduce overheating.

Smoking is another important but often overlooked trigger, as it



accelerates oestrogen reduction and is strongly associated with more severe vasomotor symptoms.

You may find it helpful to keep a symptom diary and notice whether particular foods, drinks or situations trigger your symptoms.

Whilst lifestyle adjustments can absolutely help, persistent symptoms still deserve proper specialist support. Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) remains the most effective treatment for hot flushes and night sweats because it addresses the underlying oestrogen depletion affecting thermoregulation.

For women who cannot or do not wish to take HRT, there are also non-hormonal options available, sleep-focused strategies and newer evidence-based approaches.

The key is individualised care rather than one-size-fits-all advice.

STAYING SUN SAFE

Sunlight can also be beneficial during perimenopause and menopause particularly for mood, sleep regulation and vitamin D production. Vitamin D plays an important role in bone health, muscle function and immune support, all of which become increasingly important as oestrogen declines. Safe daylight exposure can also help regulate our sleep-wake cycle, supporting better sleep at night.

However, skin protection matters too. As we age and oestrogen levels fall, skin naturally loses collagen, elastin and hydration, becoming thinner and more sensitive to sun damage. Using a high SPF daily (even in the UK) is one of the simplest evidence-based ways to protect long-term skin health and reduce premature ageing.

Lightweight breathable clothing, hats and loose cover-ups can also help prevent overheating, sunburn and dehydration during long days outdoors, whilst still allowing you to enjoy summer comfortably.

POOR SLEEP — THE NEGATIVE DOMINO EFFECT ON ALL SYMPTOMS

Summer can create the perfect storm for sleep disruption. In both men and women, lighter evenings suppress melatonin and warmer bedrooms impair the body's ability to regulate temperature. During perimenopause and menopause,

fluctuating and declining oestrogen levels further increase night waking and reduce sleep quality.

Oestrogen also interacts closely with other hormones involved in sleep, mood and anxiety, including melatonin, serotonin and cortisol.

When levels fluctuate, it can create a frustrating domino effect: poor sleep worsens anxiety, anxiety worsens flushing, flushing worsens sleep, and the cycle continues.

What and when we eat and drink can also have a surprisingly impact. Eating large or heavily processed meals late at night requires more energy to digest, generating additional internal heat. It can also disrupt gut health, leaving us feeling bloated, unsettled and sluggish, all of which can affect mood, energy and making restful sleep more difficult.

‘Early specialist support can help enormously, allowing you to explore treatment options tailored to your individual needs’

You may be tempted to reach for energy drinks during hot weather to replace electrolytes lost through sweat, but these often contain large amounts of sugar and caffeine, both of which can increase heat production and worsen palpitations, anxiety and disrupted sleep.

And contrary to popular belief, alcohol does not improve sleep quality. Even if it initially helps you fall asleep by acting as a sedative, it later disrupts restorative sleep and increases night waking. Alcohol also acts as a diuretic, increasing overnight trips to the bathroom, whilst simultaneously worsening vasodilation, meaning more overheating, flushing and sweating.

This doesn't mean you should be told to avoid every glass of rosé during regatta season, but it can help to understand what's going on in your body so you can make choices that work for you.

Simple adjustments can make a meaningful difference. Alternating alcohol with water; limiting very sugary cocktails, caffeine and energy drinks; drinking fluids earlier in the evening rather than immediately before bed;

keeping bedrooms genuinely cool; and reducing heavy late-night meals can all help improve sleep quality.

DON'T IGNORE YOUR BLADDER THIS SUMMER

One symptom area still not talked about enough is bladder health during perimenopause and menopause, particularly in warmer weather.

As oestrogen levels fall, the bladder, urethra and genital tissues can become more sensitive, which can lead to irritation and a higher risk of recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs).

Summer habits can unintentionally make symptoms worse. Dehydration concentrates urine, which can irritate the bladder lining and create the sensation of constantly needing the toilet, even when the bladder is not full.

Many women then drink less in an attempt to avoid frequent trips to the bathroom but this can actually make urinary tract infections more likely.

Alcohol and caffeine can also irritate an already sensitive bladder, as both act as diuretics, increasing urine production and leaving the bladder feeling overactive and uncomfortable.

Staying well hydrated, avoiding excessive bladder irritants and addressing underlying hormonal changes, for example with hormone replacement therapy, can make a substantial difference. For many women, genital oestrogen can be transformative for these symptoms and remains one of the most underused yet effective treatments available.

MY TAKE HOME MESSAGE

Don't let symptoms take the enjoyment from your summer.

Early specialist support can help enormously, allowing you to explore treatment options tailored to your individual needs.

Wishing you all a very happy — and hopefully sunny — regatta season.

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