

Managing Menopausal Symptoms

Handout 2

Hot flushes, lifestyle and relaxation

Hot flushes and night sweats are the main changes experienced by women during the menopause transition – the time when menstrual periods stop. They are described as sudden sensations of heat, which spread to the upper body but they do vary a lot between women. Flushes can be accompanied by sweating and palpitations or sometimes shivering, and can cause discomfort and disrupt sleep.

Hot flushes occur when oestrogen levels are changing and adjusting to a lower level during the menopause transition. They tend to be more frequent when oestrogen reduces rapidly; for example, following surgical menopause or following treatments for breast cancer such as chemotherapy or Tamoxifen. Hormone levels affect our body temperature control mechanisms – it is as if a thermostat has a narrower range so that our bodies try to ‘cool down’ by having a hot flush in response to small changes in our bodies and in our surroundings. This is why reducing stress and relaxation is important. We know that hot flushes can be triggered by stimulants such as coffee, hot food and also by changes in temperature, but they are also triggered by stress. Relaxation and paced breathing can reduce general stress levels and can be used to reduce the impact of flushes when they occur.

Relaxation involves learning a skill – you get better at it with practice so it helps to practise every day at a regular time for 20 minutes in a quiet place. When you feel a

flush coming on you can then apply the relaxation response by relaxing your shoulders and arms, focusing on your breathing and letting the flush flow over you....

It can also be useful to identify any particular lifestyle factors that trigger hot flushes for you. It could be rushing to work or drinking hot drinks or eating certain foods. Keeping a diary can enable you to identify triggers and then by making small lifestyle changes you can gain some control over your menopausal symptoms.