Q: “Are there alternatives to hormone therapy for treating hot flashes?”

A: Hot flashes are quite common in menopausal women or those on the fringes of menopause. These momentary sensations of heat, often accompanied by a flushed face and sweating, occur when the blood vessels near the skin's surface dilate to cool. Hot flashes are tied to declining estrogen levels experienced by women during menopause, but their cause is still not fully understood.

The extent and severity of hot flashes can vary from woman to woman. There are certain triggers that may bring on a hot flash or cause them to be more severe. Common triggers can include: stress, caffeine, alcohol, spicy foods, tight clothing, heat and cigarette smoke. Avoiding these triggers can lessen the number of hot flashes in some women. Also wearing light layers of clothing made from breathable fibers, performing deep abdominal breathing and exercising daily can help as well.

Low-dose estrogen hormone replacement therapy used to be the most commonly prescribed solution for hot flashes. Unfortunately, there are risks associated with hormone replacement therapy that, in some people, may outweigh possible benefits. Alternative drug therapies for treating hot flashes now include the use of antidepressants and some blood pressure medications. Certain antidepressants have been shown in clinical studies to reduce the frequency and severity of hot flashes. The herb Black Cohash has been shown to be effective, as well as the nerve medication Neurontin. Your doctor should assist you in choosing the best treatment for your individual needs, medical history and risk factors.

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