



Male menopausal symptoms during and after cancer treatment

Some treatments given to male cancer patients can cause side effects similar to those experienced by women during menopause. For example, men taking hormone treatment for prostate cancer may get hot flushes, sweats, and have changes in their libido (sex drive). Understandably, men find these side effects distressing and challenging.

This fact sheet aims to provide information about male menopausal symptoms during and after cancer treatment, how they can affect you and what can be done to help you cope.

The information does not replace talking to your doctors or nurses. It aims to act as a tool to help you prepare questions you can ask your healthcare team.

About male menopause

Men do not go through a menopause like women do. For women menopause represents a time when there is a rapid reduction in the production of their sex hormones, oestrogen and progesterone. This normally causes several psychological and physical symptoms. The production of the male sex hormone (testosterone) also lessens, as men get older. However, this usually happens slowly over time. During this time men may experience symptoms such as:

- mood swings and irritability
- sexual problems (erectile dysfunction or loss of libido)
- fatigue and weakness changes in sleep patterns
- reduced energy
- hot flushes and sweating
- depressed mood and
- lack of motivation

The exact relationship between these symptoms and a decrease in testosterone levels is still controversial. However, for men having treatment for certain cancers we know that they can also experience side effects from treatments similar to those women which go through during menopause. The cancers that this is most likely to happen with are prostate cancer and male breast cancer.

Hormone therapy and prostate cancer

Hormone therapies used to treat prostate cancer can cause menopausal symptoms. This is because these therapies may lessen the levels of hormones in the man's body. The severity and amount of side effect(s) will depend on the dose and type of hormone drug. The main short term side effects for a male taking hormone drugs for prostate cancer may include:

- hot flushes and sweating
- sexual problems
- fatigue, weakness and tiredness
- breast tenderness

These symptoms can happen very soon after a man starts therapy.



Hot flushes and sweating

Hot flushes/sweating are more likely to happen in men who take 'luteinizing hormone releasing hormone' (LHRH) blockers. These drugs prevent testosterone production by stopping the pituitary gland from making the hormone. This will cause hot flushes similar to those that women experience during menopause. Examples of these drugs are Goserelin acetate (Zoladex), Buserelin (Suprefact) and Leuprorelin (Prostap). Men find these hot flushes and sweats very uncomfortable and troublesome. A hot flush can affect the whole body with internal feelings of heat along with the surface of the skin also feeling hot to touch. The face may go red and feeling faint is not uncommon.

Sometimes hot flushes lessen after taking the hormone drug for a while but for others these hot flushes will continue for the duration that you are taking the drug. Sometimes the flush can be relieved by taking a short course of hormone progesterone. Some recent research suggests taking an antidepressant drug called venlafaxine may help also relieve hot flushes. However, you would need to discuss these options with your doctor.

Other ways to help relieve hot flushes/sweating may include:

- keeping your house cool - having a fan nearby can help
- wearing layers of cool, light cotton clothing so you can easily remove a layer if a hot flush happens
- avoid alcohol consumption, caffeine and nicotine (these can all worsen hot flushes)
- stay out of the sun
- take cool, tepid showers/bath
- put a towel on your bed in case of sweating at night
- have cool drinks nearby to sip during a hot flush

Some people say taking soy or certain herbs such as black cohosh, ginseng and red clover help with hot flushes. However, we do not have enough scientific evidence to support these claims as of yet.

Sexual problems

Men taking hormone drugs for prostate cancer will have difficulty getting an erection (impotence). This is because these drugs reduce or stop the production of testosterone. The specific drug you are taking and how long you take it for will determine whether or not erection problems are permanent. If you are taking LHRH (mentioned above) you will not be able to get an erection. However, about half the men who take androgens such as bicalutamide (Casodex) will still have a sex drive and will be able to get an erection. Difficulty getting an erection can also be caused by other prostate cancer treatments such as surgery to remove the prostate and radiotherapy to prostate.

If you are having problems getting an erection ask your doctor or specialist nurse for help and advice. There are medicines such as sildenafil citrate (Viagra) and vardenafil (Levitra) that can help you get an erection. There are other types of treatments that can help too like injections and vacuum pumps to give an artificial erection.



If you have a partner, discuss with them how you are feeling about your sexuality. This allows them to know what is happening and why sexual intimacy may be difficult at times. It can prevent them feeling rejected. It may also allow you to still feel close with kissing and cuddling, without worrying it needs to end in sexual intercourse. If things get very difficult you may benefit from some sexual counseling. Read the section on *Where to get further help and information*.

Feeling weak and tired

Hormone therapy for prostate cancer often causes tiredness and weakness (fatigue). It is the type of tiredness that cannot easily be relieved by rest. You can help to lessen fatigue by:

- doing some gentle exercises each day to give you more energy
- be kind to yourself and rest when you start to feel tired
- take things slowly or rest in between activities to help conserve energy
- plan your day and do those activities that are most important at times when you know your energy levels are high
- eat a healthy, well balanced diet to keep energy levels up
- ask for help with shopping, cooking and other daily activities to help reduce workload

Using natural therapies such as massage, yoga, acupuncture, tai chi, counseling and other relaxation techniques can also be beneficial. They can help ease stress and allow you to feel more energised and in control.

Long-term effects

There are also possible side effects that can happen to men undertaking hormone therapy for a long period of time. These long-term side effects can include:

- Weight gain
- Bone thinning (osteoporosis)
- Mood swings, depression and memory problems

Bone thinning/fractures

If you have had a cancer treatment that lowers or blocks your hormone levels then you may be at higher risk of bone thinning (osteoporosis). This could mean you may be at a higher risk for bone fractures. Treatments causing this can include chemotherapy, hormone therapy drugs (LHRH analogues and aromatase inhibitors). Your doctor may do a special scan to check your bone density. It is called a DEXA scan. Your doctor will also advise you to keep up regular weight bearing exercises such as running, walking, cycling, gym work and most team sports. Putting pressure on your bones during this type of exercise is one way to strengthen your bones. Swimming is helpful as the water is supporting your bone structure. There are also medications that some men can take to help strengthen their bones, for example, bisphosphonate therapy or a drug called denosumab. Ask your doctor if these are suitable for you.



Weight gain

It can be difficult to control your weight when you are taking hormone therapy. Try to keep up a regular exercise program each day and eat a well-balanced and healthy diet.

Memory changes

Sometimes hormone therapy can affect your memory. This can be very frustrating and upsetting for most men. Once you stop treatment your memory usually improves. However, whilst you are on treatment you can make lists or keep a daily diary to help you remember things. Talk to your doctors and nurses if you feel you are having any significant memory changes.

Male breast cancer and menopausal symptoms

Breast cancer in men is very rare but men are treated in the same way as women who have breast cancer. These treatments can cause menopausal symptoms. The most common hormone therapy given to men with breast cancer is Tamoxifen. Tamoxifen can cause hot flushes, sweating, mood changes, weight gain, loss of sex drive, fatigue and memory changes. All these side effects are the same as those discussed in the section above about hormone therapy and prostate cancer. Refer to these for more information on how men can cope with menopausal symptoms.

Your feelings

Having menopausal symptoms can be a very emotional experience. Some days you may feel ok and others you may feel angry, frustrated and low in mood. You may wonder what is going on and if you will ever feel normal again.

Talk to your partner, close friends and family about how you feel. Sharing your thoughts with someone you totally trust such as your partner or a good friend can pull you through the darkest or most difficult times.

Knowing other men with cancer go through similar experiences during their treatment can help. Your doctors and nurses can also be a great source of information and support.

Many men find it difficult to talk about their feelings. However, chatting with other men going through similar side effects from their cancer treatment is known to help some men feel less anxious. A cancer support group or counsellor can provide you with an enormous amount of help.

Some feelings of sadness, anxiety and loneliness are normal for men having side effects from their treatment. However, if these symptoms persist and you feel your mood is very low and difficult to change it is important to see your doctor. You may be suffering from depression. There is a lot that can be done to help treat depression but you need to let someone know. The sooner you get help the easier it will be to treat. Depression is not a weakness. It is a common medical condition that needs treatment. Read more about depression and how to get help on the Beyond Blue website (www.beyondblue.com).



Where to get further help and information

This fact sheet provides an overview of menopausal symptoms during and after cancer treatment. It is important you find out as much as you can for your individual situation. For more detailed information please refer to our other fact sheets and the following resources:

- Other fact sheets from Futurefertility website that may relate to this.
- Andrology Australia (<https://www.andrologyaustralia.org>)
- **BREAST Cancer Network Australia (BCNA)** booklet: Menopause and Breast Cancer (www.bcna.org.au/sites/default/files/menopause_booklet.pdf)
- **Prostate Cancer Foundation of New Zealand** (www.prostate.org.nz)
- **Sex After Treatment** booklet (Cancer Council Queensland).
[https://www.andrologyaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/BL-booklet_sex-after-treatment.pdf]
- **Sexuality, Intimacy and Cancer A guide for people with cancer, their families and friends.** (Cancer Council Australia)
<http://www.cancervic.org.au/downloads/resources/booklets/sexuality-intimacy.pdf>

You may also like to call a Cancer Helpline service:

- Australia 13 11 20
- New Zealand call 0800 **226 237**

Both these help lines will allow you to speak with an experienced cancer nurse.