

Patient leaflet HRT

How long will the flushes last?

This is very difficult to predict. They tend to start in the year or two before your menopause, peak about one year afterwards and then very slowly settle down. But individuals vary – some women don't notice them at all, whereas others suffer them for years.

Am I right to avoid HRT?

That depends. Some illnesses do mean that HRT is a non-starter – such as if you're currently suffering from some forms of cancer or liver disease. Otherwise it's a question of balancing up the pros and cons. HRT is usually very effective at easing flushing and other symptoms of the menopause. It has other benefits, too, such as strengthening your bones. But it has some disadvantages. Some of these are minor – like nausea, bloating and, in some cases, the return of your periods. But some are more important. These include an increase in the risk of some serious illnesses such as breast and womb cancer, stroke and, possibly, heart disease. The risks depend on a number of factors, such as your age, how long you take HRT and the type you take, and it is important to remember that your actual extra risk from taking HRT is very small. Your GP will be able to give you the statistics if you want them.

Are most doctors for or against HRT?

As before, that depends on a weighing up of the pros and cons in each individual case. Certainly, up until about 10 years ago, HRT prescribing was much more widespread. It was around that time that the research appeared highlighting the possible serious side effects of HRT – so doctors became much more reluctant to use it. Many now think the pendulum has swung too far, though, with doctors perhaps being unwilling to prescribe HRT even when it would be very helpful and safe.

What can I do to ease the flushes myself?

The following may help:

- Take regular exercise
- Wear lighter clothes, looser fitting clothes
- Make sure your bedroom and bed aren't too warm
- Try not to get over-stressed
- Avoid smoking and spicy foods and don't overdo caffeine and alcohol

What can my doctor prescribe instead of HRT?

Drugs called SSRIs help some women. These are actually antidepressants, but they're also potentially helpful for menopausal flushes, whether or not you're depressed. And they're not addictive. Some doctors will also try clonidine, an 'old' drug traditionally used for migraines or high blood pressure. But there's some debate about whether it works and, if so, how well. If one of these treatments helps, it's normally continued for a year or two – though, if the flushes return, it can be used again.

What about over-the-counter and herbal remedies?

Most experts advise that these should not be used. Their effect is uncertain, quality control is variable and there are concerns about side-effects and possible long-term risks.