

Ask the Mayo Clinic: What causes night sweats?

Dear Mayo Clinic: I'm a man, and I have been experiencing night sweats several times a night. They are more severe in the early morning. Can you explain a possible cause and treatment?

A: Having night sweats from time to time is common. The vast majority of people who experience night sweats -- men or women -- don't have a worrisome underlying medical condition, even when the sweating occurs several times a night.

Night sweats usually are related to normal changes in body temperature called diurnal variation. That variation means that people experience the lowest body temperature in the morning and higher temperatures in the evening. Normal body temperature changes can trigger some sweating.

These typical night sweats can be treated the same way you'd deal with walking into an overheated room. Turn on a fan, open a window, take off a layer of clothing or, at night, toss back some covers.

For some women, hot flashes and night sweats are common symptoms of menopause. When the ovaries produce less estrogen, the result is what doctors call vasomotor instability. The blood vessels in the skin can dilate suddenly, causing flushing and sweating, the classic hot flash. In an instant, women can be dripping sweat. Hot flashes are very common the first year or two after menopause, then they tend to wane over time. In severe cases, they can be treated with estrogen therapy.

Men don't have a similar experience with normal aging. Testosterone levels decline as men age but do not result in hot flash-type symptoms in most men. There are exceptions. A very low testosterone level can cause hot flashes. For example, hot flashes can be a side effect of hormonal

therapy to treat prostate cancer, which targets and reduces testosterone.

In rare instances, night sweats can be a symptom of illnesses that range from minor to very serious. If you've recently had a minor respiratory infection or a fever, night sweats aren't unusual. Night sweats have been associated with acid reflux, a relatively common problem in adults. Taking over-the-counter acid-reducing medications such as Prilosec (omeprazole) or Zantac (ranitidine) at bedtime might help.

Night sweats also can be a symptom of serious and chronic illnesses, including tuberculosis, bacterial and fungal infections, and some cancers such as lymphoma. But, night sweats likely wouldn't be the only symptom of a serious illness.

If you have fever, a change in appetite, weight loss, lymph node swelling, rashes or other new symptoms along with night sweats, consult your health care provider. Or, if your night sweats are profuse, so much that you need to change your nightclothes and bedding, talk with your doctor to rule out any underlying medical condition.

-- J. Taylor Hays, M.D.,

Internal Medicine, Mayo Clinic,

Rochester, Minn.

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