



PIC QUESTION OF THE WEEK: 05/02/05

Q: What is the role of venlafaxine (Effexor®) for the treatment of hot flashes in menopausal women?

A: Hot flashes are a substantial problem among menopausal women. Difficulty arises because treatment options are limited and adverse drug effects may be significant. Despite the effectiveness of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in the treatment of hot flashes, the Women's Health Initiative revealed that long-term use (5 years or more) of HRT in healthy menopausal women increased the risk of stroke, thromboembolic events, heart disease, and breast cancer. Thus, nonhormonal alternatives may be needed for the long-term management of hot flashes in women at high risk for developing adverse events. Previous trials have evaluated the effectiveness of clonidine, methyldopa, propranolol, vitamin E, and gabapentin in the treatment of hot flashes. Due to variable results and associated adverse reactions, their use is often limited. Several antidepressants including venlafaxine (Effexor®), fluoxetine (Prozac®), and paroxetine (Paxil®) may be beneficial for managing hot flashes. Although not fully understood, 5-HT (serotonin) receptors in the hypothalamus may play a role in thermoregulation, thus decreasing body temperature. Several clinical trials have evaluated the efficacy and safety of venlafaxine in reducing the frequency and severity of hot flashes. In most studies, dosage was initiated with 37.5 mg daily and adjusted to a maximum of 75 mg daily. Adverse effects included dry mouth, constipation, nausea, and decreased appetite. There were significant limitations in these trials including small population size, short-term study periods, and subjective primary study endpoints. In conclusion, venlafaxine appears promising in the treatment of hot flashes in menopausal women. It may be particularly useful in women with a history of breast cancer. Large scale, well designed, comparative clinical trials evaluating efficacy and safety are needed to determine the role of venlafaxine for this indication.

References:

- Kockler DR, McCarthy MW. Antidepressants as a treatment for hot flashes in women. *Am J Health-Syst Pharm* 2004; 61: 287-92.
- Loprinzi CL, Kugler JW, Sloan JA, et al. Venlafaxine in management of hot flashes in survivors of breast cancer: a randomized trial. *The Lancet* 2000; 356: 2059-63.

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