
What Does a Hot Flash Feel Like?

5 MINUTE READ

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If you've never had a menopausal hot flash — or if you suspect that you might have but aren't sure if you're correctly IDing the issue — you might be looking for a more detailed description of the experience than what your doctor has provided. Sure, you get hot. And sweaty. And maybe a little red, anxious, and generally out of sorts.

But what does a hot flash feel like, really?

A few anecdotes from women who've lived to tell the tale will help us find the answer — or at least feel like we're not alone.

Karen S. recounted her steamy restaurant tale with [The Girlfriend](#):

"For years I denied that I was perimenopausal. When I started to get a little hot, I would blame the lack of A/C or too much wine. But one night I couldn't ignore it any longer. I was sitting with my boyfriend at a cute little Italian café, sharing a bottle of red wine, when I started to sweat. I'm talking 'pouring-down-my-face, hair-sopping-wet' sweat. I said, 'Isn't it really hot in here? Also, I think I'm having an allergic reaction to this wine!' He actually started to get concerned that I was having a stroke or heart attack. Finally, he suggested that it might be due to the dreaded M word."

Theresa Venus shared her big meeting meltdown with the [Menopause Goddess Blog](#):

"I was in a very important real estate meeting, trying to negotiate some tense issues between a contractor, cabinet builder, and a

high-energy buyer — all men. Out of the blue, ta-da! Starting with that deep down warning glow, the heat spread faster than the Angora wildfire throughout every molecule of my body. It was intense, and before I knew it, try as I might, I couldn't make out what was being said. I saw their lips move and then I saw a look of bewilderment on their faces. Soon all eyes were on me. Finally, what sounded like Darth Vader, a voice said, 'Are you alright?' Guess what intelligent words spouted from my lips? 'I must take off my clothes!' Needless to say, those men grabbed their clipboards and ran like hell."



Debbie Dickenson recounted her shocking intro to hot flashes for [HealthyWomen](#): *"My first encounter with menopause came before my 52nd birthday. It was summer in Florida, and this hot flash hit. It was shocking and debilitating, like an inferno within me that kept intensifying and intensifying. Although I'd heard people talk about hot flashes, I didn't recognize what it was at first. I just knew something extreme was happening with my body. I tried to dismiss it, but when it happened again, I called my stepmother. 'Aha,' she said, 'It's probably a hot flash!'" During that phone call, she gave me great advice — what might help, what not to try. Then she said, 'Oh, and by the way, it's going to last 10 years.'"*

Keep in mind that everyone experiences hot flashes differently, so even these stories may not match your own experience when you start experiencing your own changes in hormone levels. Still, if you're among the [75 percent of women](#) in North America who get [hot flashes with menopause](#), knowing that you're hardly alone can be comforting.

Why Hot Flashes Happen

So, [what causes hot flashes](#) exactly? The exact mechanism is still a mystery, but you can probably blame hot flashes on declining estrogen levels messing with your body's "[thermoneutral zone](#)"—the comfortable window in which you're not freezing or sweating. If

your body temp gets knocked above that zone even slightly, blood flow to your skin increases, your vessels dilate, and you start perspiring.

And yes, it can happen quickly and without much warning.



For reasons that aren't totally clear, Black women are [more likely than women of other races](#) to get hot flashes; Asian women the least likely. While many American women who get hot flashes feel the intense heat and redness most on the face and chest, that's not true for everyone — and ethnicity may play a role here as well. Women in Mexico, for instance, feel hot flashes more on the [back of their neck](#), while those in Bangladesh feel them on top of their head. As you can see, these [menopause symptoms](#) can easily vary from person to person.

Wondering [how long hot flashes last](#)? It really depends on your hormonal imbalance and how your body reacts to it. Most women who get hot flashes deal with them for [6 months to 2 years](#), but some unlucky ladies get stuck with them for up to a decade. Each episode lasts, on average, about [30 seconds to 5 minutes](#).

What To Do

About Menopausal Hot Flashes

While suffering silently is always an option with this menopause symptom, it's not a great one. The best way to deal with hot flashes depends on how bad yours are, your current lifestyle habits, and your personal health history. To that end, here are a few options to consider:

Lifestyle changes

- **Don't smoke.** It's bad for your lungs, your heart, and your hot flashes. [Research](#) has found that heavy smokers have a four-fold increased risk of having hot flashes compared to lifelong non-smokers. If you're still lighting up, it's time to sign onto a stop-smoking program.
- **Slim down if you're overweight.** Research on body mass index (BMI) and menopausal symptoms has been mixed, but there is some evidence that weight loss might help your hormonal imbalance. [University of California San Francisco researchers](#) found that overweight and obese women who lost weight through diet and exercise were twice as likely as those in the control group to see a reduction in menopausal symptoms (including hot flashes) within 6 months.
- **Dress for comfort.** Dress in layers so you can easily don a little less clothing in the midst of a flash. Choosing breathable or moisture-wicking fabrics may also help.
- **Cut back on alcohol, caffeine, and spicy foods.** They don't bother everyone, but for many women these are menopausal [hot flash triggers](#).

Alternative/integrative remedies

- **Practice mindfulness.** Learning to fully live in the moment — with the help of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training — might not nix hot flashes and night sweats, but [research](#) shows that it can make the heat a lot less uncomfortable.
 - **Try acupuncture.** [Studies](#) on acupuncture for menopausal hot flashes have been pretty mixed, but a few find that real acupuncture beats the sham variety for helping you keep your cool.
 - **Discuss natural remedies for hot flashes with your doctor.** Yes, you can get them without a prescription, but that doesn't mean they're effective or safe, especially if you're taking any medication. The one most likely to help with hot flashes (maybe) is [black cohosh](#), although some women swear by flaxseed, red clover, or wild yam. Ask your doctor before adding any herbs to your regimen.
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Prescription fixes

- **Consider hormone therapy.** On the plus side, it works. [Hormone therapy](#) (also called hormone replacement therapy) compensates for the natural yet abrupt loss of estrogen. The catch is that it's been linked to an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, blood clots, and breast cancer. If you decide to use hormone replacement therapy, go with the lowest-effective dose for the shortest period of time required to get relief.
- **Ask about antidepressants.** Whether you're experiencing mood swings or not, an [antidepressant in the SSRI class](#) might reduce the frequency and intensity of your hot flashes.
- **Investigate other non-hormonal treatments.** These include a

blood pressure drug called clonidine (Catapres) and the antiseizure drug gabapentin (Neurontin). Clonidine seems to ease hot flashes, especially among women with [breast cancer](#) who are being treated with tamoxifen. [Gabapentin](#) may be even more effective for members of this group.

As you can see, there are as many options for treatments and changes as there are experiences with hot flashes, but what remains the same for all is clear: Don't suffer in silence.

Head to our product page to check out your options. A menopause-trained doctor will review your choices to make sure you get the right treatment.

Sources

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