

Is It Menopause OR IS IT ME

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Sensory Overload

Your newfound hatred of crowded spaces, wool sweaters, and you husband's chewing is a harbinger of menopause.

By Lisa Arbetter Published: Oct 08, 2025 12:03 PM EDT

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Sure, we know that menopause is behind night sweats and hot flashes, but is it to blame for everything that goes awry when you're over a certain age? In this new series, we're unpacking some of the funkiest health woes people can encounter in midlife to see which can be chalked up to The Change, and which are...well, just a you thing.

The overhead lights in your office, which have never been worth noticing, suddenly buzz so loudly you swear there's a wasp hive in the ceiling. Your perfectly worn-in jeans feel like you rolled around in sand before putting them on. And, OMG, when did your partner's breathing get so loud?

Welcome to sensory overload, one of perimenopause's strangest and most sanity-testing symptoms. For some women, it's just one sense (like taste, touch, smell) that goes haywire. For others, everyday life ambushes all five for maximum overwhelm.


Heather Hirsch, MD, a women's health expert and the author of **Unlock Your Menopause Type** and **The Perimenopause Survival Guide**, says she sees it all the time in her practice. "Women will tell me they don't want to travel anymore, they don't want to drive on the highway, they can't stand crowded places," she says. "It's the noise, the people, the heightened sensory input. It's this thing they did a million times before, but now something feels off about it."


Why Everything Is Turned Up to 11

Sensory overload isn't an official menopause symptom à la hot flashes and night sweats, and there's not a ton of research on the phenomenon. But Hirsch says that she experienced it herself and has had many patients over the years complain about sudden sensitivity. "It's basically a lowered threshold to filter lots of different inputs from sensory neurons," she says. (For Hirsch, she suddenly couldn't stand wearing jewelry: Her earrings were heavy, and rings were irritating.)

Hirsch explains it like this: Estrogen is the referee, and your

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neurotransmitters—like serotonin and dopamine—are the players. In this case, our players field all of the sensory input flooding your brain every moment, from what you're looking at on your phone to the chilly breeze on your arm and the taste of your gum. "If the referee just says, 'Well, I'm going to take a break, you guys figure it out yourselves,' things just don't go as smoothly as they normally would," she says. In other words, without estrogen to impose order, the input can get overwhelming for your brain. (It might be extra challenging if you have [ADHD](#) or [autism](#), since these conditions also make it harder to process sensory info.)

One way to tell if it's hormone-related, and not something else, is that your symptoms come and go rather than bug you all the time. Sensory sensitivity also shows up during other hormone-driven moments in our lifespan. "We see similar sensory changes in pregnancy and postpartum," says Hirsch. "Even in the week before your period, when estrogen drops, you might have noticed heightened sensitivity. It's why your husband's chewing suddenly sounds like it's on blast, and you just snap."

Relief Is in Sight

There are ways to ease the onslaught:

- **Track your symptoms.** Use a journal or app to log when sensory overload hits. Look for patterns. This will help you suss out if this is hormonal or something else.
- **Adjust your environment.** Little things help. Wear noise-canceling headphones at the grocery store if the sound of fellow shoppers puts you on edge, for example. Hirsch now travels with a small pouch for her jewelry, so when it starts to feel unbearable, she has a soft place to stash it.

- **Soothe your skin.** If your sensitivity includes itchy skin or newfound issues with scent, use gentle, fragrance-free, and hypoallergenic moisturizers and soaps. If you can't handle textured fabrics, buy softer, looser clothes (thank you, '90s grunge reboot).
- **Advocate for yourself.** Mention that you're in perimenopause when talking to your doctor. Many won't connect the dots, so it's up to you.
- **Try hormone therapy (HT).** Hirsch uses HT as both a treatment and a diagnostic tool. "If your symptoms improve with hormone therapy, it confirms they were hormonal," she says. "About two out of three women in my practice find relief with HT."

And take heart—you won't have to live out your days plugging your nose, covering your ears, or death-staring the stranger whose backpack brushed you on the bus. "This is probably more of a perimenopause symptom than a postmenopause symptom," Hirsch says. "Once you're a couple of years postmenopausal and hormones stabilize at lower levels, I think it should go away for most women."

In other words, you *will* come back to your senses.

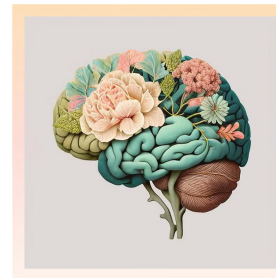
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