

Hyperhidrosis (excessive sweating) *(page 1 of 3)*

Hyperhidrosis - what is it?

Hyperhidrosis is excessive sweating.

Sweating is one of the most important ways the body loses heat, but people with hyperhidrosis produce sweat in amounts far greater than that needed to control their temperature.

There are two main types of hyperhidrosis. The more common type is focal hyperhidrosis (see below). This affects about one person in 200 and usually starts during the teens and twenties.

Generalised hyperhidrosis (which affects the whole body) is less common and is usually caused by another illness such as hyperthyroidism, infection or diabetes. In these cases, the excessive sweating usually stops when the underlying illness is treated.

What causes hyperhidrosis?

It is not known why some people develop this condition. About 30 - 50% of people with hyperhidrosis have a relative with a similar problem, suggesting there is a genetic link.

Hyperhidrosis is caused by over-activity of one type of sweat gland, the eccrine gland. These glands are found all over the body, but are most concentrated on the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet and in the armpits.

Normal sweating is caused by exercise, stress, anxiety, strong emotions, heat or cold, alcohol, coffee, tea, smoking and hot or spicy food. It may be worse at certain times of the day. These are also reasons for hyperhidrosis, only here the amount of sweating is increased.

Hyperhidrosis does not cause body odour; the smell that some people think results from sweating is caused by bacteria on the skin if sweat remains on the skin for a long time.

What can I do to help myself?

- choose cool clothing. Consider having a change of clothing available during the day
- try to keep your work environment cool and well aired
- avoid foods and drinks that trigger sweating



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- stress and anxiety are common problems for everyone. Think about possible ways to reduce stress and try to make time to relax during the day
- odour can be prevented by attention to personal hygiene, such as taking frequent showers.

Treatments

Antiperspirants: You can buy stronger solutions of aluminium chloride (the active ingredient of some antiperspirants) at your chemist, however some people find this can irritate their skin

Iontophoresis: (for hands and feet) using specialised equipment during a course of 4-7 treatments, hands or feet are bathed while an electric current is passed through water. This usually works for 2-months at a time and equipment can be purchased for home use. Some people find this too painful.

Botox: (for armpits) Botox, a protein that is toxic to the nerves supplying the sweat glands, can be used to treat hyperhidrosis. A small needle is used to inject very small amounts (0.1 - 0.2ml) of a solution of Botox just under the skin in 10 - 15 places in each armpit. The sweating will gradually stop in the first week after treatment. It is not permanent, but lasts 3 - 12 months. Further treatment may then be given.

Complications of Botox

- About 1 in 20 people find that when they stop sweating in the armpits, sweating increases in other areas of the body, but this will stop as the effect of the Botox wears off. There is a risk of Botox causing an allergic reaction.
- Botox has not been tested in pregnancy or breastfeeding, so cannot be considered safe in these circumstances.
- Botox may cause muscle weakness.

Before having Botox treatment you must tell your doctor or nurse if you:

- think you may be allergic to Botox
- are pregnant or trying to become pregnant, or breast-feeding
- suffer from muscle problems
- are using antibiotics or drugs to relax muscles
- are taking any medicines, including any that have not been prescribed by your doctor.

You will not be able to have Botox treatment if you:

- have a condition or you are taking any medicine that affects blood clotting (including Aspirin)
- have had any problem with Botox treatment in the past
- have had any surgery to your armpits.

Before treatment with Botox

Please shave your armpits 2 days before treatment, and do not use antiperspirant on the day of treatment.

Please wear a dark coloured shirt or T-shirt on the day of treatment.

Sympathectomy: This operation is carried out with a general anaesthetic (fully asleep) usually as a day case in the day surgery unit, if you are fit and well. This treatment (which is permanent) can be used to treat excessive sweating of the armpit, hands and face, as well as some other rare conditions. Sometimes one side is treated at a time, making it necessary to have two operations if both sides need treatment.

The nerve that supplies the sweat glands is cut during this operation using a keyhole technique. A small incision is made under the arm and one in the chest area. To allow access to the area, the lung on the side to be treated is emptied of air (collapsed) so that the nerve can be cut, before refilling the lung with air again.

This operation results in satisfactory reduction of sweating in 95 cases out of 100.

Complications of sympathectomy

- There is a small (less than 1 in 500) risk of Horner's syndrome, which is a series of symptoms caused by damage to a nerve. This includes a permanently contracted (small) pupil (the black part of the eye) and a droopy eyelid. If this complication occurs, it will be permanent.
- Sympathectomy may result in more sweating (known as compensatory hyperhidrosis) in other parts of the body (e.g. the back), which may be more inconvenient. The relief from sweating or flushing may be incomplete or asymmetrical (known as Harlequin Syndrome).
- It may be necessary to use moisturising cream for the palms of the hands afterwards to prevent cracking of the skin.
- There is usually moderate pain after the operation, making coughing and deep breathing difficult. This is caused by bruising of the ribs and should be controlled with painkilling tablets.
- Finally there is a small risk of piercing the lung, resulting in a temporary leak of air from the lung or there may be bleeding into the lung space. If this happens you may need a drain, and will have to stay in hospital overnight.

Further information

www.hyperhidrosisuk.org

This is an on-line support group run by and for people with Hyperhidrosis.

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