

# Hyperhidrosis (excess sweating)

BY PAM HARRISON

**S**weating is an essential bodily function. Whether you're working out at the gym or just outside on a hot day, you sweat to keep your core body from going beyond 37 C, a "safe" temperature at which your vital organs will not overheat. It's normal, too, for stress and even spicy food to make you sweat a little. But about three per cent of adults – as well as some children, usually after the onset of puberty – sweat excessively in areas such as the face, under the arms, the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet, without even moving a muscle.

If you're one of these people, here's what you need to know about this condition, called hyperhidrosis.

## **1** Hyperhidrosis is not caused by too many sweat glands or oversized sweat glands.

The body's estimated four million sweat glands, which are connected to nerves in the sympathetic nervous system, trigger the release of a chemical called acetylcholine. For some unknown reason, certain people overreact to the release of this chemical and sweat excessively on their face, hands and feet and under their arms. Hyperhidrosis that affects the entire body is less common and is sometimes caused by infection, cancer or a hormonal change such as menopause.

## **2** Hyperhidrosis affects your quality of life.

For people who sweat profusely, social niceties such as a firm handshake or friendly embrace are fraught with anxiety. The disorder can have a profound impact on occupational activities. Consider, for example, people with excessively sweaty palms who may not be able to hold even simple tools

without them sliding out of their hands. Or they may find it difficult to hold a book, type on a keyboard, hold a pen or take notes – all basic functions for students and professionals alike.

## **3** Treatment can be simple and inexpensive.

To control mild cases of hyperhidrosis, consider over-the-counter antiperspirants that contain high concentrations of aluminum, such as Drysol. Or use a prescription topical cream called Dehydral. These preparations are relatively cheap but they can irritate the skin and cause burning and a rash.

If you have hyperhidrosis confined to the hands and feet, you may also find relief from an iontophoresis machine, which emits a low-intensity electric current that disrupts the function of sweat glands. This machine can be costly (up to \$800) and the procedure is time-consuming, requiring about 30 minutes per treatment, at least four days a week.

## **4** For more severe cases, Botox or surgery can be effective.

Injections of botulinum toxin (Botox) in the hands, feet, underarms or scalp block the action of acetylcholine to stop excess sweating. Some 95 per cent of those who are treated with Botox report an 80 per cent reduction in sweating after about one week, and the benefit of a single treatment lasts about seven months. Botox injections are considered safe and have few side-effects. As a last resort, you may consider a surgical procedure called endoscopic thoracic sympathectomy, during which physicians cut the nerves that cause excessive sweating. "It's very effective, but it has the potential to cause excessive sweating in other areas

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(such as on the face, scalp, back and chest) – what we call compensatory hyperhidrosis – after surgery, which is not always reversible," says Dr. Peter Vignjevic, a dermatologist and assistant professor of medicine at McMaster University in Hamilton.

## **5** Don't give up; there's probably an effective treatment for you.

Don't be embarrassed to ask your doctor about treatment options. And make sure he or she takes your hyperhidrosis seriously; all too often, physicians don't consider excessive sweating a problem, or they think the problem can't be fixed. There is much you can do to alleviate excessive sweating. For information about where to find a hyperhidrosis expert near you, go to [www.sweatmanagement.ca](http://www.sweatmanagement.ca) (the website is linked to the Canadian Dermatology Association). ●