

Sweating and bad body odour have developed an overt air of social repugnance and nature's irony is that the more anxious we feel about it, the more our bodies perspire.

The thought of shaking hands becomes a mental sweat storm, and while carefully applied foundation slips from our faces, shopping expeditions become more about which fabrics will retain odour or which colours will hide our telltale patches. It's our body's built-in air conditioning system, but it seems sweat and our self esteem have become inextricably linked.

In *Clean: An Unsanitised History Of Washing*, (Profile Books, R267), Katherine Ashenburg writes, "In today's society, which is in thrall to a cult of cleanliness, smelling someone's real body or allowing your own real body to be smelled has become an intrusion, a breach of a crucial boundary."

In a recent online poll, 66 percent of online respondents associated sweatiness with being nervous, while 49 percent assumed perspirers were overweight or unfit and false assumptions about the physiology of perspiring – including that our sweat has an odour, and that we only sweat to cool ourselves down. The way your sweat smells, as well as how much you sweat, can be influenced by bacteria, your mood, diet, some drugs and medical conditions, and fluctuating hormone levels, for example during menopause.

We'll go to severe measures to stop our sweat, since sweating and the smell of our bodies has become an indicator of health and cleanliness, a factor in social acceptance and even a gauge of economic status, but it wasn't always so. For historical reference Ashenburg cites Napoleon famously writing to Josephine from a campaign: "I will return to Paris tomorrow evening. Don't wash."

Dirty used to be *de rigueur*, but sexual preening today involves a good scrubbing down and a dousing of creams and perfumes. It begs the question; has the "cult of cleanliness" corrupted our coupling?

In 2007, the journal *Biology of Reproduction* published a study claiming male underarm sweat can reduce stress in women, as well as alter the timing and length of their menstrual cycles.

The study claimed that there are pheromones in male underarms – despite the tendency to tout them as love potions – that have more to do with triggering survival behaviours and altering physiology, than sex. The jury's out on whether or not we are blocking our biologically programmed sexual behaviour or inhibiting our survival instincts by "plugging" up our sweat, but for those of us who go clammy at the thought, there are numerous options, so try not to sweat the small stuff.

DEODORANTS AND ANTIPERSPIRANTS

Good old deodorant is your first line of defense, but deodorants only mask odour. The aluminium chloride preparations in antiperspirants are what can control sweating. It reacts with the electrolytes in sweat to form a temporary gel-like "plug" that stops sweat from reaching the surface of the skin.

Aluminium may sound like the sweat solution, but there has been debate over the use of it in antiperspirants, with studies linking it to cancer and even Alzheimer's disease. Robyn Smith of South African natural and organic consumer website Faithful-to-Nature (www.faithful-to-nature.co.za) says that these "plugs" are blocking a natural process. "You have to ask yourself where the toxins are going if



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FALSE ASSUMPTIONS
ABOUT *about*
the **PHYSIOLOGY**
OF PERSPIRING
– *including that our*
SWEAT has AN ODOUR

they are not able to naturally go through your underarm ducts?" she questions, adding that parabens (a preservative found in many cosmetic products including deodorants) and aluminium also "mimic oestrogen, the cancer-promoting hormone." "A study at Keele University in the UK found aluminium salts can get into breast tissue," says Smith. "Worryingly, these salts are more concentrated in the areas of the breast where cancer is more likely to develop: on the side and towards the armpit."

The rebuttal, according to Dr Anushka Reddy, who treats hyperhidrosis patients at the Medi-Sculpt Clinic in Johannesburg, is that there is no decisive evidence to support these claims. Quoting The US National Cancer Institute (NCI), Reddy says they're "not aware of any conclusive evidence linking the use of underarm antiperspirants or deodorants and the subsequent development of breast cancer," adding that the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSAs), The American Cancer Society (ACS) and US Food and Drug Administration all agree. CANSAs points out that the incidence of breast cancer would have surely increased after the discovery of antiperspirants if they were a direct cause, but this isn't the case.

There's no quarrel about aluminium salts and parabens cropping up in breast tissue in studies, but whether their presence is incidental or whether they actually cause cancer is the vital statistic.

Some speculate that the debate was sparked by women being warned not to wear antiperspirants or deodorants before a mammogram, as residue can show up in X-rays as an abnormality.

*For aluminium free deodorants, visit www.faithful-to-nature.co.za. Try *Hemporium's deodorant*, R43 for 100ml, containing hemp seed oil, arnica, zinc and beeswax, or *Pure Beginnings Eco Living Roll On*, R85 for 75ml.*

BOTOX

If you'd rather stay away from the grey area of aluminium, Reddy says Botox is an effective treatment for excessive sweating. It works by "reducing the effect of local nerves stimulating the sweat glands," resulting, quite simply, in less sweat. Botox can be used for the underarms, hands and feet, groin and forehead. Dr Alastair Clark of the Sandton Aesthetic Institute in Johannesburg explains that you won't instantly cease to sweat: it takes between a week and ten days to work, but you should be sweat free for between three to five months after a treatment. Tiny injections are administered about 1cm apart, and

how many you receive depends on the area being treated. Clinics charge about R60 per unit, so for both underarms you can pay about R4 000.

Despite years of controversy, Reddy assures that the treatment is "simple, safe and virtually painless," with the only potential side effect being "very minor bruising."

The Medi-Sculpt Clinic offers Botox for hyperhidrosis (www.medisculptclinic.co.za) as does The Sandton Aesthetic Institute (www.sandtonaesthetics.co.za).

IONTOPHOTRESIS

You can shock yourself sweat-free with iontophoresis. The part being treated is held under water or against a moist pad, while a weak electrical current is passed through the skin. You'll need quite a few sessions for it to work (about 10 sessions of 20 minutes each) at about R150 per session. Maintenance visits are required up to four times a month depending on the severity. It has been described as "uncomfortable" and only a handful of clinics offer it, so ask your doctor if they know of someone in your area.

Capetonians can go to the Skin Laser Centre in Tygervalley for these treatments www.skinlasercentre.co.za or visit www.sweathelp.org for further listings.

ORAL MEDICATION

Popping pills is also an option: there are prescription drugs that prevent the release of acetylcholine, the neurotransmitter that makes sweat glands go into overdrive, but they're known to have uncomfortable side effects like a dry mouth, and don't seem a popular option. Ask your doctor if she feels it's an option for you.

SURGERY

This is the most drastic measure. Your choices are either a local sweat gland resection, which is a straight gland removal, or an endoscopic thoracoscopic sympathectomy (ETS), which interrupts part of the sympathetic nerve chain, permanently disrupting the nerve

signal that causes the body to sweat excessively. Any surgery comes with risk though, and the complications, says Reddy, "include allergic reaction to anaesthetic agents, infection and bleeding."

ETS is considered a last resort, adds Lisa Pieretti, executive director of the IHHS, "because it frequently causes serious, irreversible compensatory sweating. In fact, most physicians do not recommend ETS surgery because of the serious negative side effects of the procedure." ■

The IHHS (www.sweathelp.org) has the following sweat survival tips:

1 Drink enough fluids to ensure your internal air conditioning system is always working properly.

2 Wear loose, lightweight, natural fabrics, and light-coloured clothing. Watch out for the advent of "smart fabrics" containing copper and silver to fight odour-causing bacteria and keep you cool.

3 Protect your skin. Stay out of direct sunlight, wear sunscreen, and wear a wide-brimmed hat. Look for waterproof sunscreen gels or "sweat proof" and "sports" formulations.

4 Choose lightweight, breathable or ventilated shoes. The IHHS recommends wearing open sandals or using sweat-absorbing inserts. Visit www.summersoles.co.za. Absorbent foot powders and antiperspirants can also be used. Ask your dermatologist or podiatrist.

5 Apply antiperspirant once in the morning and again at night. Consider a stronger antiperspirant like Perspirex, available at Dis-Chem and leading pharmacies (call 011 790 2000), or Odaban, available online and at selected pharmacies, call 0861 ODABAN or email office@odaban.co.za