

"It's like having the sweat glands stuck in the 'on' position all the time."

When sweating is a problem

For most Americans, life's sweatiest moments happen at work. A recent Harris Interactive survey of 1,005 U.S. adults revealed that job-related issues, including going on an interview or confronting a boss, make folks perspire more than any other situation.

Unfortunately, nearly 8 million Americans sweat profusely all day, every day, no matter what they're doing. These individuals suffer from hyperhidrosis, a medical condition that causes them to sweat above and beyond the amount required to maintain a normal body temperature.

According to Dr. David Pariser, president of the International Hyperhidrosis Society and professor of dermatology at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, Va., "Hyperhidrosis is a medical disorder that causes excessive sweating. These days, there are a number of effective treatments for people with the condition."

Researchers believe that people with hyperhidrosis produce too much of a specific neurotransmitter in the nervous system, or have sweat glands that overreact to normal levels of the chemical. The end result is profuse sweating that can leave the person almost perpetually drenched. According to Pariser, "It's like having the sweat glands stuck in the 'on' position all the time."

Hyperhidrosis is more than just a case of damp underarms or clammy palms. People with the disorder produce up to five times more sweat than people without the condition.

Sophia Parente, a middle school teacher from Virginia Beach, Va., was diagnosed with hyperhidrosis two years

ago. "I didn't find the courage to talk to a doctor about this until I was 28 years old," she said. "I didn't have any idea that I had a medical condition. I just thought I was weird, and this was somehow my fault."

Parente's silence is typical of individuals with hyperhidrosis. A recent survey revealed that 83 percent of people who suffer from excessive sweating have never asked a physician for help, either because they're too embarrassed or they don't think anything can be done about the problem.

The effects of hyperhidrosis are often devastating. Parente said that excessive sweating of her palms has been a problem since her childhood.

"When I was in fourth grade, I didn't want to raise my hand, because I knew the other kids would see the sweat dripping off it," she noted.

As an adult, shaking hands became a major source of embarrassment. "I dreaded it, because people can't hide their reactions," Parente said. "As soon as they shook my hand, they would immedi-

ately wipe their own. It made me feel repulsive and disgusting."

Fortunately, hyperhidrosis can be successfully controlled. Treatment may start with a prescription-strength antiperspirant, which can reduce sweating not only under the arms, but also on the hands and feet.

If antiperspirants don't provide relief, a procedure called iontophoresis may do the trick. The procedure uses a water bath to conduct a mild electrical current through the skin.

The exact way in which iontophoresis helps limit excessive sweating isn't known, but researchers speculate that

the electrical current temporarily blocks the sweat gland. "It's like short-circuiting the sweat glands in the hands," Pariser explained. "Most patients just have to use it for 20 minutes three times a week to get results, but it doesn't work for everyone."

If iontophoresis doesn't slow sweating sufficiently, doctors can administer injections of botulinum toxin type A, commonly known as Botox, to the affected area. Botox works by blocking the nerves that stimulate the sweat glands.

"It's the same Botox used to treat frown lines and wrinkles," Pariser noted. "Patients can have injections under their arms or in their hands, and they can expect to remain completely dry for four to six months afterward."

A final treatment, known as endoscopic thoracic sympathectomy, or ETS surgery, works to deactivate the sweat glands by interfering with nerve signals from the spinal cord. While ETS can be an effective treatment for hyperhidrosis of the palms, it carries a high risk of serious, long-term side effects.

After trying heavy-duty antiperspirants and iontophoresis with limited success, Sophia Parente opted to have Botox injections to stop the sweating in her hands. "It took about five days to start working, but the results are amazing," she said. "I finally feel good about shaking hands. I can read a newspaper without completely saturating it. Having the procedure has changed my life."

Says Pariser, "Many people think their sweating is just something they have to live with, but they don't. Excessive sweating can be successfully treated."

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