

Excessive sweating

How much is too much?

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Most everyone sweats to some varying degree. It's an unsightly but normal bodily function. Sweating is harmless, but, for millions of Americans who suffer from excessive sweating, it can be a difficult problem—both physically and emotionally.

What is hyperhidrosis?

Hyperhidrosis is a medical condition in which a person sweats excessively and unpredictably. Most commonly occurring in the hands, excessive sweating can also occur in the armpits or the feet.

How much sweating is too much? There's no real way to measure, but people with the condition often experience sweating that goes way beyond the body's normal need. They may sweat even when they're still and the temperature is cool. The condition is embarrassing and makes activities of daily living difficult. People who have hyperhidrosis often feel self-conscious about shaking hands or trying to hide sweat spots on their shirts. They may have difficulty gripping the steering wheel, grasping objects or even wearing slip-on shoes.

What causes hyperhidrosis?

"In most cases, there's no known cause," says John Moore, M.D., a thoracic surgeon on staff at Northside Hospital. "It can be brought on by stress, emotion or exercise but also can occur spontaneously without any trigger."

Some medical conditions, such as anxiety, cancer, heart disease, stroke or hyperthyroidism, can cause hyperhidrosis. However, most cases have no distinct cause and occur in otherwise healthy people. Forty-four to 66 percent of patients with hyperhidrosis have a family history.



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How is it treated?

According to the Society of Thoracic Surgeons, approximately 1 to 3 percent of the population suffers from hyperhidrosis, yet less than half seek treatment—most likely because they don't know that treatment exists.

For patients whose sweating is brought on by another medical condition, their problem most likely will go away when the underlying condition is treated. For everyone else, several noninvasive treatment options are available, including over-the-counter and prescription-strength antiperspirants, Botox injections and medications.

In more severe cases, a minimally invasive surgical procedure called sympathectomy may be recommended when other treatments fail. Through several small incisions, the surgeon cuts or destroys the nerves that cause sweating in the problem area—literally turning off the signal that tells the body to sweat excessively.

"The procedure is usually performed on patients who have hyperhidrosis of the palms but doesn't work as well for those who have excessive armpit sweating," says Dr. Moore. "Patients often see results immediately."

When to contact a medical professional

If sweating is disrupting your life or if you experience sweating in conjunction with any other symptoms, such as chest pain or weight loss, talk to your doctor.

Physicians at Northside Hospital offer a multidisciplinary approach to the treatment of hyperhidrosis through sympathectomy and other nonsurgical treatments.