



Fact Sheet: Body Odour

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What is BO?

Known scientifically as *bromhidrosis*, offensive body odour has likely afflicted all of us and we know the distress of catching a whiff of ourselves not to mention the trauma of having to be stuck on a crowded train with someone with bad BO.

Shudder. This factsheet is mainly about pit pong.

What causes BO?

BO is caused by the action of our normal skin bacteria on our sweat, breaking down the odourless secretions into smelly molecules. If you sweat a lot then you are more likely to smell. Odour can also come from when we sweat the smelly molecules from what we ingest such as garlic and alcohol. Some people have a rare genetic disorder called triethylaminuria which causes a fishy body odour.

Why do my clothes stink even if I don't?

Isn't that the worst? You go to the gym in fresh clothes and within a few minutes you totally pong and it's not your actual armpit but the clothes. When we sweat the fabrics we wear soak up sweat, bacteria and smelly molecules. Synthetic fabrics, compared with natural fibres like cotton, 'favour' the more pong-causing bacteria as well as soaking up the more pungent odorous compounds hence develop the worst stench. Unfortunately, standard cold washes do not effectively remove the bacteria or the stinky compounds.

How can I fix my BO?

The simplest way to fix body odour is to use an antiperspirant (anti-sweat) deodorant (anti-smell). Most antiperspirants are deodorants but not all deodorants are antiperspirants. Antiperspirants use metallic salts, usually aluminium, which both temporarily block the sweat glands and are antibacterial. By reducing the sweating and bacteria they reduce smell. Deodorants work by masking smells. Higher concentration aluminium salts (~20% or higher) are more effective.

Some may be concerned about the potential harms of antiperspirants but there is no evidence for harm beyond a small risk of mild skin irritation,

specifically there is no evidence a link between breast cancer and Alzheimer's disease and use of antiperspirants/ deodorants. For detailed information on 'natural' deodorants see the paper by [Kanlayavattanukul & Lourith](#) as it has a long scientific description of herbs to treat body odour (need to scroll down a bit to find it). Using antiperspirants does change the microbiome in the armpit and may favour a smellier population. An option is to not use deodorants and allow the natural microbiome to re-establish.

Other tips for managing BO, include washing regularly, hair removal and weight loss, if appropriate. There are more invasive options for those who are super sweaters.

But what about my clothes?

Washing smelly clothes on hotter cycles and/or adding a rinse with an antibacterial can improve the smell of garments. Other options include sport specific detergents, soaking in vinegar or alcohol, and drying your clothes in the sun. There are also antibacterial sporting fabrics available but note these have special washing instructions.

In summary, our skin bacteria eat our sweat and the byproduct is pong. Using a good antiperspirant deodorant will reduce sweat and smell. Washing your stinky clothes on a hot wash (if feasible, remember some garments will shrink on hot) and adding a dash of an antibacterial wash will help remove the odour. If you have ongoing concerns regarding excessive sweating or smell, see your GP.

References/ more information:

- Sinclair. Australian Family Physician. 2013. 42(5) p. 266 <https://www.racgp.org.au/afp/2013/may/hyperhidrosis-and-bromhidrosis/>
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- Cancer Council WA (accessed May 2020) <https://www.cancerwa.asn.au/resources/cancermyths/deodorants-breast-myth/>
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