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Are Antiperspirants the Pits?

If working out, walking, playing or just plain living causes you to perspire, congratulations! You're a normally functioning human being. But if, like many people in modern society, you prefer to mask your natural scents and perhaps even try to stop perspiration entirely by using commercial antiperspirants, you may be risking serious illness or even cancer, according to some experts in the homeopathic community.

The primary ingredient in antiperspirants is aluminum chlorohydrate, which can be highly toxic if ingested, or extremely irritating if it comes into contact with delicate tissue. (That's why they tell you not to use it on irritated or broken skin.) But before you go through your medicine cabinet and throw out all of your deodorizing cosmetics, you should know that deodorants are different from antiperspirants. Deodorants mask body odor while still allowing you to sweat. Antiperspirants are designed to actually stop the perspiration from escaping through your skin. In other words, they do exactly what their name implies: They stop you from sweating.



Human underarms are designed to perspire. It's part of the body's cooling system, and the idea of stopping your sweat seems a lot like stopping a dog from panting when it's overheated. Blocking sweat is certainly unnatural, but is it dangerous? Last spring, when an anonymous email message circulated on the Internet warning that antiperspirants were "a leading cause of breast cancer," many people panicked.

The theory behind the email message is that because the lymph glands are located so close to the surface of the skin along the outer edge of the breast, over an extended period of time, they absorb the toxic chemicals found in antiperspirants. Most breast cancers occur in this section of the breast, and some studies have shown that an examination of cancerous breast tissue reveals significant amounts of stored aluminum chlorohydrate. Alternative medicine practitioners are up in arms about this, but the traditional medical establishment--and some experts on the sidelines--aren't completely convinced.

According to the American Cancer Society, thorough epidemiological studies of breast cancer risk have not found antiperspirant use to be a risk factor for breast cancer, much less the "leading cause" of the disease. And even the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation says that the email rumor inaccurately linked antiperspirants to breast cancer. According to the Komen Web site, "Extensive research has been done on the risk factors associated with developing breast cancer, none of which have been linked to the use of antiperspirants."

But homeopaths have a very different perspective. Heidi Rose, a Colorado-based, internationally renowned naturopath, agrees that there is a very real danger. "We know that 75 percent of breast cancers attach to the outer half circle of the breast, close to the armpit, exactly where your lymph glands are," Heidi explains. "A biopsy of this cancerous tissues taken from this area usually show aluminum chlorohydrate--the primary toxic chemical in antiperspirants--embedded in the tissue. So we know that it is absorbed there. And because it's a constantly toxic inbound synthetic material that the body cannot fend off, washing thoroughly with soap won't help, because the material has already

seeped into the glands."

As might be expected, this question has rapidly become a political one. In June 1999, the Cosmetics, Toiletry and Fragrance Association (CTFA) issued a statement saying, "It has come to our attention that an email is currently circulating on the Internet which falsely states that antiperspirants are unsafe...This email is nothing else but an unsubstantiated Internet rumor that has no factual basis."

Certainly the CTFA's agenda is to protect its members, who are cosmetics manufacturers. But what about statements made by allegedly neutral parties, such as Dr. Eric Friedlander, a pathologist and medical educator? He's adamant about the falseness of the breast cancer/antiperspirant relationship. "The cells that give rise to breast cancers (breast epithelium) are not even found in the lymph nodes of the armpit. And primary cancers very seldom arise in these nodes." In addition, Dr. Friedlander writes, "There are no published studies in the referenced medical journals linking antiperspirant use and breast cancer." And his Web site goes into further detail on the topic.

Web sites such as Honeybee Gardens and Natural Minerals Deodorants link aluminum and breast cancer, but keep in mind that they sell natural deodorants. The Women's Nutrition Center website goes so far as to claim that "studies linking breast cancer to underarm antiperspirants have been undertaken, but the manufacturers are too powerful to allow this information to be publicized." As for definitive information, the jury's still out. If you want to be on the safe side, however, try a natural deodorant. Although the antiperspirant-addicted among us may need some time to get used to the unusual feeling of "glowing"--as our grandmothers used to call it--these deodorants really do work.

