Persistent body odour can be disease-related



YOUR HEALTH

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The worried mother pushed her daughter forward. "She used to smell so nice as a baby. Now I can't stand the smell of her sweat. Even her teacher has complained."

Body odour changes as we grow older. Characteristic body odour becomes more noticeable after puberty and is influenced by our genes, skin bacteria, hormones, diet and hygiene. Each person has a distinctive scent. Dogs, with their extraordinarily sensitive noses, recognise their owners by smell. Humans too are sensitive to odours and often recognise familiar people, places and surroundings by their characteristic smells.

Unpleasant body odour can be embarrassing. It may arise from the mouth as bad breath, or halitosis, or from the skin and sweat. Diet can influence how we smell because certain foods break down into compounds that may be released in breath or sweat. Common offenders include garlic, onions, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, spices and alcohol.



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Sometimes an unusual or persistent odour can be associated with disease. Trimethylaminuria, a rare metabolic disorder, produces a characteristic fishy smell. Poorly controlled diabetes can cause a fruity or acetone-like smell on the breath, while severe kidney disease may produce an ammonia-like odour. Advanced liver disease and some infections can also alter body odour. However, smell alone cannot diagnose any of these conditions.

Before laboratory investigations and scans became readily available, physicians often relied more heavily on all their senses, including smell, while examining patients. Even today, a distinctive odour may occasionally provide a useful clinical clue, but it must be followed by appropriate examination and investigations.

Most everyday body odour, however, is related to sweat and the bacteria living naturally on our skin. There are two main types of sweat glands: eccrine and apocrine. Eccrine glands are found over most of the body. They produce a clear, watery, salty sweat that evaporates from the skin and helps cool the body. Apocrine glands are concentrated mainly in hairy areas such as the armpits and groin. They become active around puberty and produce thicker secretions. These glands can become more active during emotional stress, anxiety, fear and pain. The secretion itself does not initially smell. However, bacteria on the skin break it down and release compounds responsible for characteristic body odour.

To reduce body odour:

- Bathe regularly, particularly after exercise. Wash the armpits, groin and feet with soap and water
- An antibacterial wash containing benzoyl peroxide may sometimes help reduce odour-causing bacteria, but it can irritate sensitive skin and should not be overused
- Use an antiperspirant containing aluminium salts. Antiperspirants reduce the amount of sweat reaching the skin, while deodorants mainly help mask odour
- Antiperspirants may also help with sweaty feet if the product is suitable for this purpose
- Change into clean clothes after bathing or exercising. Do not keep wearing sweaty clothes or socks
- Choose breathable fabrics such as cotton, particularly in hot and humid weather
- Keep the feet dry and change socks daily. Shoes should be allowed to dry completely between uses
- Trimming or removing underarm hair may help some people by reducing the area where sweat and bacteria accumulate.

Home remedies such as vinegar, lime or baking soda are often recommended for body odour, but they can irritate or burn sensitive skin and are not essential.

If body odour suddenly changes, becomes unusually strong despite good hygiene or is accompanied by excessive sweating, fever, weight loss, increased thirst, frequent urination or other symptoms, it is advisable to consult a doctor. Occasionally, persistent body odour is not merely a hygiene problem but a clue that something else needs attention.

The writer has a family practice at Vellore and is the author of *Staying Healthy in Modern India*. **If you have questions on health issues, write to** *yourhealthgm@yahoo.co.in*