

body&soulhealth

Say goodbye to sweat and tears

A new treatment offers fresh hope to those with excessive sweating and body odour. Anna Shepard reports

Until last year, Toni Street dreaded the arrival of warmer weather. While everyone else was peeling off their clothes, she would continue to wear big black jumpers. "People would say, 'Aren't you hot in that?'" and I would always say, "No, no, I'm fine. But of course I was boiling," says the 39-year-old mother of three, from Abingdon, Oxfordshire. "There was no way I could take my jumper off. I'd be soaking underneath."

By the time she was 15, Street knew that she had a problem with underarm sweat. She started wearing T-shirts under school blouses to hide the marks but never talked about it. Her GP said she would grow out of it, but by the time she started work — in human resources — she was having to dry her armpits under hand-dryers each lunchtime.

"It affected everything," she says. "I only wore dark clothes and I was always telling fibs to explain away my wet patches. If someone hugged me, I'd immediately come

up with a story about how I'd just been for a run. If I was going on a date, I'd find an excuse to change seconds before leaving the house, as I would already be soaked."

More than a million people in the UK suffer from axillary hyperhidrosis — excessive sweating — which is caused by overactive sweat glands producing far more perspiration than is needed to control body temperature. It can occur on any part of the body but is most often found under the arms, on the palms of the hands, the soles of feet, or on the face.

Unlike the kind of sweating that most of us experience — during exercise, in hot weather or at times of stress — the condition is characterised by continual wetness that comes through clothes in all situations, however many showers are taken or strong antiperspirants are applied. Although it is neither painful nor linked to long-term health problems, it is socially debilitating.

Out of embarrassment, many people don't seek treatment. They

may not even realise that it is a medical condition.

Research from the US suggests that there is a hyperhidrosis gene: according to a survey by Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York, there is a family history of the problem in 60 per cent of cases.

Although sweat glands can be re-

moved provided enough are left to get rid of excess heat from the body, until recently treatment options were limited: either the relief obtained was only temporary or major surgery was involved, with the risk of unpleasant side-effects. In the short term, some people tried Botox injections, known as "Sweatox". Better known for keeping wrinkles at bay, the treatment can be used to cut off the nerves to sweat glands. It is popular with celebrities, such as Madonna, who don't want to be bothered by damp patches, but prohibitively expensive for most people: it requires visits to a cosmetic surgery every four to eight months, at between £300 and £500 a time. What's more, regular use can lead to patients becoming immune because their bodies begin to produce antibodies that kill the botulinum toxin. This is what happened to Street after two years of injections.

Hoping for a long-term solution, she read about a technique being brought to the UK from Brazil by a pioneering vascular surgeon. Last year she opted to be among the first patients to try Laser Sweat Ablation (LSA), an hour-long treatment, costing £3,500, that uses a laser to burn away sweat glands.

A year on, the result has been life-changing, she says, reducing her underarm sweat by 95 per cent.

"Using local anaesthetic, we work on the under-layer of skin, going no deeper than 2.5mm, so it's not at all invasive," explains Mark Whiteley, the only UK surgeon performing this technique, who runs a private practice on Harley Street and another in Guildford, Surrey. "After lifting up the skin to access the sweat glands, we use a laser to destroy the glands and the nerves that feed them."

"I was a little nervous about being awake for the procedure," says Street, "but I was thrilled to be aware of everything that was going on. There was no pain. I was just disappointed that I couldn't see more of what

was being done."

The technique does not decrease overall sweating, as you need to perspire to keep your body cool. It merely stops it in one area — say, under your arms. The sweat is redistributed around the rest of your body, but in such small amounts that you don't notice it. Before he began using the new technique, Whiteley treated excessive sweating with a surgery called ETS (endoscopic thoracic sympathectomy), which involves cutting the nerves that lead to the sweat glands. "By comparison, there were so many risks," he says. "It's a major operation, going into someone's chest between the ribs, deflating a lung, going round the heart and operating on a nerve surrounded by blood vessels."

Two years on from the first LSA treatment in the UK, Whiteley has completed his 70th operation and collected feedback from all his patients. More than 90 per cent are happy with the results; the average level of sweat reduction has been over 80 per cent.

"In the past few months, sweat reduction has been much higher — up to 98 per cent — because we have improved the technique so much," he says. "My first patients had some grazing and ulcerating after the operation. We have stopped this now. I've been doing re-



search on pig skin to improve our laser use . . . there is a faster recovery time and a higher volume of sweat reduction.”

The biggest surprise for Whiteley has been the discovery that his technique can also be used to treat a different sweat problem. Bromhidrosis, commonly known as body odour, is a distressing condition caused by overactive apocrine glands, which produce a greasy secretion that lubricates hair follicles. The result is unpleasant-smelling body odour.

As with excessive sweating, the problem is often assumed to be the person's fault. “People

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At work, people would walk past my desk sniffing

think it's because you are too fat or too thin, or you don't shower enough or use the right deodorant. We've heard it all,” says Beverly Stacey, founder of the online support group verysweatybetty.com.

This was the case for 24-year-old James Allington, who was a teenager when he first noticed a constantly sticky feeling under his arms. He didn't produce a lot of sweat, but he could tell by people's reaction that it was smelly.

“At work, people would walk past my desk sniffing,” says the office worker from North London. “It was really demoralising. Even if I showered three times a day, I still had a problem. But I never had the courage to talk about it with friends or colleagues. The doctor gave me a strong antiperspirant that I had to put on at night, but it itched like hell. It was unbearable.”

When Whiteley was first approached by bromhidrosis sufferers, he made it clear that the LSA technique was not designed for them. But several, including Allington, were keen to try it as a last resort.

Having now treated ten patients using a technique closely resembling the original one, except focusing on removing apocrine glands rather than the eccrine glands that produce moisture, Whiteley is confident that it is the best available treatment for the condition. He is soon to publish a research paper assessing the impact of LSA on bromhidrosis — the only problem being how to measure smell scientifically. “Until someone invents a smell-o-meter, I have to rely on feedback from patients and their close family,” he says.

Allington believes that he now has a normal smell. “It's hard for me to tell, so I have to judge by other people's reactions. So far I think it has worked, although I'm still paranoid if I hear someone



Toni Street: “I know I sweat like a normal person now. It just hasn't sunk in yet”

sniffing. I've been able to relax more since my treatment. I'm going out with friends and I'm less nervous about my work environment.”

The only negative feedback from patients undergoing this latest anti-sweat treatment concerns adapting to life afterwards, regardless of its success. After years of keeping your arms clamped to your sides and avoiding social situations, it can be hard to free yourself.

“My brain still thinks my

problem exists,” says Street. “I've trained myself not to like colourful clothing or to do activities that could make me sweat. It's hard unlearning these things.” Gradually, though, Street is becoming more confident. “I've been for tests and seen the figures,” she says. “I know I sweat like a normal person; it just hasn't sunk in. This summer I hope to start buying some bright, tighter clothes, even if the thought still makes me nervous.”