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SWEAT

This Summer, Embrace Your Pit Stains



By Katja Vujić, a writer at The Cut covering culture, news, wellness, and style.

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 SAVE |  1



Photo: Nitas/Getty Images

Since puberty, I've been a very sweaty girl. I remember acutely the clammy embarrassment that began in the seventh grade, when I would inevitably end up with massive rings of moisture in the armpit region of my Standard School Attire-mandated polo shirts. I'd clamp my arms tightly to my torso, avoid raising my hand to answer questions, and pull every strand of hair on my head forward over my shoulders in a desperate attempt to hide the problem. Over time, I learned to never wear certain colors, even if I liked them, because of the pit-stain risk.

As an adult, I still often find myself embarrassed during a workout class, or on a hot summer day, when I look around and realize I'm the sweatiest person there. When I notice someone else's upper lip beading with droplets, or a back as damp as my own, I feel affirmed and grateful — a little less alone.

But it doesn't happen often. Not only am I someone who naturally sweats more than the average person, there are ways to forcibly stop sweating, from those powdery antiperspirants to getting literal poison (sorry, "Botox") injected into your underarms, or undergoing invasive surgery to remove your sweat glands. This summer, I'm saying *enough*. No more preventive measures. No more embarrassment. Bring on the sweat, baby.

First, allow me to address what I must imagine is your first qualm: Pro-sweat does *not* mean anti-deodorant. B.O. is not caused by sweat itself but by its interaction with the bacterial microbiome hanging out in our armpits. According to Sarah Everts, author of *The Joy of Sweat: The Strange Science of Perspiration*, deodorant does nothing to stop you from sweating. It works by either killing the underarm bacteria, masking the scent, or some combination of the two. What *does* prevent you from sweating is the aforementioned powdery antiperspirant, which uses aluminum salts to block your sweat glands so that you can't release sweat.

And to address another potential qualm, I am *not* talking about medical conditions like hyperhidrosis. I embrace sweat in all volumes, but I'm not a doctor and would recommend talking to one if you're concerned.

We've got a long, hot summer ahead of us, and I'm no longer willing to fight nature. Sweat is a gift! It means the sun is out and your coat is buried deep in the corner of a closet. Those glistening drops slowly inching across your soft, warm skin? Whether they're pooling at the small of your back or creating a darkened ring around your neckline and armpits, they're sexy! Luca Guadagnino proved once and for all with *Challengers* that sweat = horny.

As Everts argues in her book, perspiration is one of humanity's superpowers, right up there with opposable thumbs. "It's one of the things that makes humans unique and it's also one of the things we're better at than literally any other animal on this planet," she says. "We are extremely good at thermoregulation because we can evaporate our heat off using sweat." Not only did sweat give humans the evolutionary advantage because we can run and cool off at the same time (whereas more powerful predators had to stop moving when they started overheating), but it quite literally helps keep us alive. "We really need to start embracing our sweat because it is, without AC around, literally the only thing between life and death for us," says Everts.

Sweat has the potential to be lifesaving, or at least useful to our health, in other ways. As Everts explains to me, our sweat glands are pulling the liquid from our blood, which means that it contains the same substances: water and salt, primarily, but also smaller molecules of hormones like cortisol, estrogen, and other biomarkers. Dr. Esther Sternberg — research director of the Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine (and its Stress Challenge, Sweat Collection and Stress Correlation lab) at the University of Arizona and co-author of *Well at Work: Creating Wellbeing in Any Workspace* — is working on creating noninvasive diagnostic testing devices that would measure our sweat instead of our blood.

Dr. Sternberg says many of the benefits of sweat are difficult to prove and the lab’s research is ongoing, but it’s possible that sweat could have a hand in regulating stress levels. “We’ve shown in papers that we’ve published that the stress hormone cortisol is broken down in sweat to inactive forms, and it’s possible that if you sweat enough, you’re helping to regulate your stress response,” she explains. She told me sweat contains an immune molecule called Interleukin-8, which protects against bacterial infection. “It’s really interesting that when you’re sweating your body gets kind of buttered with this immune molecule,” she says.

No moisturizer has ever had me glowing the way pure sweat does. I always get compliments on my complexion after a strenuous bike ride to the function. Everts confirmed that’s a real thing. “It’s called sweat bathing,” she says. “Effectively you’re pushing gunk out, so if you have clogged pores, sweat is pushing stuff out.” Just make sure to rinse off at some point, because otherwise said gunk is stuck sitting on your skin.

“Sweat should be added to the whole body-positivity movement,” says Everts. “It’s your body trying to keep you alive. It’s your body just being itself.” She writes in her book about the series of marketing campaigns that have trained us, over the last hundred years, to see our body’s natural functions as shameful and embarrassing. How boring! What a gift it is that our own bodies can cool us down!

A few weeks ago, I went to an outdoor Tyler the Creator show and watched as he got progressively sweatier; by the end, his crisp green jacket was completely soaked. It only added to the energy of his performance, like the immense effort he put in, the transformative effect of his music, was physically visible in the subtle transformation of his appearance. Enjoy your summer, and if you find yourself with moistened garments after dancing on a rooftop or hosting a barbecue, don’t sweat it.

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