

# Body Odor

**T**he chemistry of armpits is rather interesting. Much of our body odor comes from emanations of the apocrine sweat glands, most of which are located in the underarm area. We're all born with these specialized glands, but they don't do much until puberty, when they start secreting a milky ooze that has no aroma. If we don't wash it off regularly—every six hours or so—bacteria begin to colonize these apocrine secretions. And a while later we develop . . . guess what?

Men have more and bigger apocrine glands than women, so they have more body odor, although I bet women spend more on deodorants.

In addition to poor hygiene, body odor may be caused by a zinc deficiency, diabetes or liver disease, chronic constipation and certain parasites. Vegetarians claim that meat-eaters have more body odor.

## The Amazing Amazonian Turn-On Shrub

**S**ome years ago, the tropical shrub the Amazonians call *picho huayo* came up in a conversation I had with Alwyn Gentry, Ph.D., the late tropical botanist and senior curator at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis. He said that hunters in the Amazon rub the fruit of this shrub all over themselves in the belief that it prevents their quarry from smelling them. In other words, picho huayo masks their body odor. It's not a true deodorant, however, but just an aromatic mask.

Since that chat, I've asked several Amazonian guides about picho huayo. They use it not only when hunting wild game, they said, but also when courting women. It makes men smell more attractive to the opposite sex, the guides claim.

One noted Amazonian taxonomist (a specialist in classifying plants) swore to me that he had tried it with remarkable success, saying slyly, "I have good empirical evidence that it works." Picho huayo could be a gold mine for some enterprising entrepreneur with a flair for romance.

For those who would like to try picho huayo to attract members of the opposite sex, I'm sorry, but it's not available in the United States—at least not yet.

Bathing is probably the best way to control body odor, but if you don't feel socially at ease without a deodorant, there's no need to use commercial roll-ons or sprays.

## Green Pharmacy for Body Odor

Herbs have a long and illustrious history of use as deodorants. Not surprisingly, the herbs most widely used all have antibacterial action against the microorganisms that make our apocrine secretions smell unpleasant. Here are some to try.

🌿🌿🌿 **Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*), licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) and other herbs.** My trusty database shows that coriander and licorice both contain 20 chemicals with antibacterial action. Oregano and rosemary have 19; ginger, 17; nutmeg, 15; cinnamon and cumin, 11; and bay, 10. (Black pepper has 14 and garlic 13, but I can't see rubbing them under my arms.)

Looking at the quantity of bactericidal compounds in various herbs—as opposed to the number of compounds—we find that licorice contains up to 33 percent bactericidal compounds (on a dry-weight basis); thyme, up to 21.3 percent; oregano, up to 8.8 percent; rosemary, up to 4.8 percent; coriander, up to 2.2 percent; and fennel, up to 1.5 percent.

All of the herbs mentioned so far should have some impact against the bacteria that cause body odor. One way to use these deodorant herbs is to

## The Positive Side of BO

**B**ody odor is really a two-way street.

Socially and cosmetically, we consider BO "bad." We bathe frequently to get rid of it and spend lots of money trying to cover it up. But it turns out that body odor also contains pheromones, mysterious chemicals that attract the opposite sex with their subtle aromas.

Scientists have known for a long time that pheromones play a principal role in animal mating. But until fairly recently, conventional scientific wisdom held that these chemicals had no amorous effect on us humans. Now studies have demonstrated that pheromones do indeed play a subtle but very real role in human attraction.

My wife is more apt to tell me to take a shower than to snuggle up to my armpits, but who knows? Maybe our aromas were part of what attracted us to each other in the first place. I'm inclined to believe that this is true.

powder them and rub them into your underarms. It's an effective approach, but it might also stain clothing. So instead, I would suggest making a strong tea of the herb or herbs of your choice, soaking a cloth in it and applying the moist cloth as a compress for a few minutes.

Add plenty of sage, and if various reasonably well-informed sources are correct, your tea might also provide antiperspirant benefit.

You might also use these herbs in a bath. Scoop them into a cloth bag and run hot bathwater over it.

Another approach is to buy the essential oils of these herbs, dilute them in vegetable oil (try a drop or two of essential oil per tablespoon of vegetable oil) and use the resulting mixture as an underarm massage lotion. Just remember that you shouldn't ingest the oil, as even a small amount can be toxic.

Medical anthropologist John Heinerman, Ph.D., in *Heinerman's*

*Encyclopedia of Fruits, Vegetables and Herbs*, suggests making an antiperspirant sage tincture by steeping ½ cup dried, powdered sage in 1¼ cup vodka. Age the mixture for two weeks, shaking it twice a day, then strain the sage out and store the liquid in a clean bottle. Try applying it three or four times a day. Alcohol can dry the skin, so discontinue use if it becomes irritating. (You can also sip it as sage liqueur.)

✎ **Baking soda and cornstarch.** Apply a mixture of these powders in malodorous areas. The drying action of both powders helps, and as anyone who has ever used an open box of baking soda to control odors in the refrigerator knows, baking soda has deodorant action. I know that baking soda is not an herb, but it's such a natural approach to this problem that I thought I'd include it.

✎ **Turnip juice.** Here is a personal anecdote from Dr. Heinerman that I find interesting: After a Japanese colleague told him about using turnip or

daikon radish juice to control body odor, Dr. Heinerman juiced up some turnips and briskly rubbed one teaspoon under each arm. His conclusion: "Turnip juice won't prevent sweating, but it keeps body odor from occurring for up to ten hours." It sounds too good to be true, but I intend to try it if I'm home alone for about three days and have a good supply of turnips on hand.

✎ **Vegetables containing zinc.** Zinc deficiency may contribute to body odor. It's not easy to get zinc from processed foods, because it's often removed during processing, but whole foods contain good amounts. Good food sources of zinc include spinach, parsley, collard greens, brussels sprouts, cucumbers, string beans, endive, asparagus and prunes. Spinach has the most, and the rest of the foods are listed in descending order according to how much zinc they contain. If you'd like to make a deodorant cocktail, consider juicing any or all of these vegetables. (I'd leave out the prunes.)

✎ **Vinegar.** Dr. Heinerman recommends using cider vinegar in place of commercial deodorants. It makes sense to me, because vinegar is an antiseptic. I also steep some of the aromatic herbs, such as sage, in the vinegar.