

How to treat sweat problem

There are around 3,000,000 to 5,000,000 sweat glands in human body. Normally, sweating is used to lower the body temperature in warm conditions. Hyperhidrosis occurs when sweating exceeds the need for body temperature regulation. Primary hyperhidrosis may be caused by excessive activity in sympathetic nervous system. Palmar hyperhidrosis is the most common manifestation, affecting around 1% of the world population. Although not a serious disease, palmar hyperhidrosis can affect patients' work performance and daily activities, such as writing, driving or shaking hands. Severe cases can even lead to social, emotional and psychological problems.

Topical treatments are available for palmar hyperhidrosis, such as antiperspirants, botox injections and iontophoresis. However, these offer only temporary relief at best. Sympathectomy surgery is the only method of permanent cure for palmar hyperhidrosis, by removing small sympathetic nerve segments from both sides of the chest.

Sympathectomy can reduce hyperhidrosis in virtually 100% of patients, and almost all patients report improvements in quality of life. A proportion of patients may develop side effects, the most common being compensatory sweating elsewhere in the body. Other side effects such as facial dryness, Horner's syndrome and gustatory sweating are extremely rare but irreversible. Medical advice from an experienced thoracic surgeon should therefore be sought before undergoing sympathectomy surgery.

The Cardiothoracic Surgery Unit of HKU Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine at Grantham Hospital now routinely performs sympathectomy surgery using the latest needlescopic Video-Assisted Thoracic Surgery technique. Using instruments 3mm wide, the surgery can be done with less pain, tiny wounds and faster recovery than before. In future, the HKU Cardiothoracic Surgery Unit will further refine techniques to reduce the side effects of sympathectomy surgery and to adapt it as a day surgery procedure.