Hi Alice!

I’ve been a good kid working out and being healthy, but the gym I go to has uniforms and I always wear a black t-shirt. That’s great, until I sweat and it leaves salt rings where the sweat reached out to. Ewwww. This is embarrassing, and I have to wash the shirt before I can wear it again, which is annoying since I go almost every day and need to re-wear shirts once or twice. ANYWAYS, how can I reduce the amount of salt in my sweat, and prevent these embarrassing white rings from forming on my clothes? Eating differently, drinking more water, help!

— Salty

Answer

Dear Salty,

It’s no wonder you’re a little salty — committing yourself to working out most days of the week takes hard work and planning. Spending extra time washing workout clothes is probably the last chore you want to do. Here’s what you may want to keep in mind: Nearly everyone sweats, and all sweat is salty. In fact, salty sweat stains are normal, even common. Sweat is your body’s method of cooling itself off and getting rid of waste. There’s even some evidence to suggest that sweat may serve as a way to protect your body from bacteria hanging around on your skin. This process occurs by beads of sweat binding to the bacteria present on the skin, reducing the amount of microorganisms in the area and reducing risk of infection. The binding of bacteria to sweat also results in the not-so-great-smelling odor that’s associated with sweat stains. Although washing your shirts after your workouts can be annoying. Exposing your ‘pits to the same bacteria repeatedly without washing in between can lead to some bacterial infections. Salt rings may feel embarrassing in the moment, but they can also serve as a good reminder to wash your clothes in between workouts. It also may help to feel and smell fresher, too!

You mentioned trying to decrease the amount of salt in your sweat. The amount of salt in sweat varies from person to person, and the variation stems from a number of biological and environmental factors, such as genetics and diet. One way you might think of to reduce the amount of salt in your sweat is to reduce the sodium intake in your diet; however, evidence suggests that any changes in sodium from diet are minimal at best in decreasing excreted salt.
While some people may benefit from doing this for other health reasons, you may currently be getting just the right amount for your body and it’s not clear whether decreasing salt would make the salt rings go away. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that adults consume no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day. If you’re within range, you may want to talk with your health care provider before making alterations to your diet.

Since you don’t mention any health concerns or troubling symptoms, instead of altering your diet or water consumption to solve this problem, you may want to first try some other tactics:

- Wear an undershirt to absorb sweat before it reaches the fabric of your outer black shirt (but be sure to wash it after!).
- Bring lots of black shirts to the gym and leave them in a locker. Keep dirty and clean shirts separate, and once you’ve run out of clean ones, take all of them home to wash in one go.
- If you’re in the market for new gym clothes, try buying some designed to wick sweat away from the body and dry quickly. Spot clean the stains away after each workout with cold water, and wash the entire shirt thoroughly every two to three uses.
- Use an antiperspirant, which will help prevent sweat from happening in the first place. Less sweat means less salt to form stains on your clothes. It’s wise to be careful when applying — antiperspirants can cause stains, too.
- If it’s an option, you may choose a gym that doesn’t require black shirts. Shirts of other colors may hide the evidence of salty sweat rings better than black ones.
- For a less expensive option, you may try physical activity at home or in the great outdoors.
- For a sweat-free but challenging cardio workout, you could try swimming if you have a pool available to you. The cool water will prevent sweat from sticking to your skin or clothes.

Most critically, when you wash your workout gear, be sure to set the washing temperature to at least 60° Celsius (or 140° Fahrenheit) and use detergent with bleach to prevent the buildup of bacteria on your clothes. This will both inactivate the bacteria in the material and potentially remove the stains from the shirt. For more general information about physical activity and fitness, check out the Fitness [2] section of the Go Ask Alice! archives.

Alice!
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