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Antiperspirant use and breast cancer development – The facts and the fiction ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I received an e-mail message about antiperspirants causing breast cancer. Something about the "pits" not being able to release toxins that are normally released when sweating. I just wanted to verify before I went out and started forwarding this.

Thanks,
Capt. Clueless

Answer

Dear Capt. Clueless,

You aren't giving yourself enough credit! Rather than clueless, you are smart to check out the validity of the e-mail message you received. Though e-mail and the Web have the power to connect us to lots of great information, they also have the power to bring a whole lot of "spam" into our lives. And this includes many half-truths, deceptive descriptions, and urban myths.

According to the [American Cancer Society](#) ^[2], [National Cancer Institute](#) ^[3], [Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation](#) ^[4], and [U.S. Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) ^[5], there is no conclusive evidence to substantiate the claim that antiperspirant use is linked with the development of breast cancer.

The mass e-mail described suggests that it is a buildup of "toxins," inhibited from leaving the body through the underarm lymph nodes by antiperspirant use, which is responsible for the abnormal cell growth of breast cancer. In reality, while the lymph nodes do clear some toxins from the body, they do not release toxins through sweating. Sweating is done through sweat glands, and the lymph nodes are not connected to these sweat glands. Besides, most cancer-causing toxins are removed from the body by the kidneys or liver.

Another misleading theory indicated that the chemicals in underarm antiperspirants are absorbed through the skin or enter through nicks caused by shaving, disrupting the lymphatic system, causing a buildup of toxins in the breast, leading to breast cancer. To date, there is no evidence

from solid scientific research supporting this theory. In fact, the chemicals used in antiperspirants, among a wide variety of other goods, are thoroughly scrutinized by the FDA for safety. The FDA does not have or has not seen any significant evidence or data that indicate chemicals in antiperspirants (or deodorants) cause cancer.

Other research into breast cancer has focused on preservatives used in deodorants and antiperspirants called parabens. These studies have found low levels of parabens in tissue samples from human breast tumors. Concern was raised over this finding as parabens act similar to the hormone estrogen, which has been shown to promote growth of normal and cancerous breast cells. This study, however, neither proves that parabens cause breast cancer nor identifies antiperspirants or deodorants as the source of the parabens. Moreover, the study did not show that parabens are only present in cancerous breast tissue. Also, parabens are hundreds to thousands of times weaker than estrogen and are therefore much less likely to play a role in breast cancer development when compared to estrogen. In effect, more research is needed in order to establish a stronger link between parabens and breast cancer.

Furthermore, a lot of research has been done on the factors that seem to be related to the development of breast cancer. The use of antiperspirants has never been identified as one of these factors. The two most significant risk factors are being female and aging. Other characteristics that may raise one's risk of breast cancer are:

- A personal or close familial history of breast or ovarian cancer
- Early onset of menstruation (before age 12)
- Menopause starting after age 55
- Giving birth to a child after the age of 30, or not having children at all
- Any signs of abnormal cell growth in the breast, as seen through a biopsy

Although self-care and lifestyle choices seem to have an impact on whether or not individuals develop cancer, early detection and treatment are the best tools currently available in the fight against this often-devastating disease. For breast cancer prevention, the following are strongly recommended:

- Annual mammography for women age 40 and above
- Breast examination by a health care professional at least once every three years for women ages 20 to 39 years; annually after age 40
- Performing breast self-examination (BSE) monthly starting by age 20
- Talking with your health care provider if you notice anything unusual or any changes when performing the BSE

You can read the Related Q&As for more info about breast cancer, including preventing it. If you're still interested in cutting antiperspirant out of your hygiene routine, many companies offer deodorant-only products. Look for them in health food stores, shops carrying environmentally friendly products, and drug stores.

Alice!

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