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Wet palms? Don't sweat it



Mr Ray Wong, who has suffered from sweaty palms since he was 15, with a machine he developed which treats excessive sweating with electric currents. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

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SINGAPORE - While his schoolmates were celebrating the end of polytechnic in 2017 by shaking hands and exchanging hugs, Mr Ray Wong kept his hands to himself, wiping the sweat from his palms on his graduation gown.

Mr Wong, 24, who has suffered from sweaty palms since he was 15, saw his life improve after buying a bath that sends mild electric currents through the hands to temporarily disable the sweat glands.

It worked and he could lift weights safely without gloves and no longer hesitated to shake hands for fear of embarrassment.

"It was a turning point in my life," says Mr Wong, a final-year mechanical engineering student at the Singapore Institute of Technology.

He suffers from hyperhidrosis, a condition in which the sweat glands are oversensitive, leading to excessive perspiration in areas such as the armpits and hands.

Sweating is crucial in regulating the body's temperature in hot or stressful conditions.

But Singapore's heat and humidity can send sweat glands into overdrive, says Dr Kan Yuk Man, a surgeon who specialises in treating sweaty palms. Stress also triggers perspiration as it increases heart rate, generating heat.

Chronic health conditions such as diabetes or liver or kidney problems can also cause the body to perspire more, he adds.

While there is no data on the prevalence of sweaty palms in Singapore, the National Skin Centre (NSC) estimates that it affects roughly 5 per cent of the population.

Dr Kan, who works at KYM Surgery at Farrer Park Medical Centre, says most of his patients developed sweaty palms in their childhood. One in 20 cases is down to an imbalance of hormones, which can create an intolerance of heat, causing excessive sweating.

While some people experience less severe sweaty palms with age, Dr Kan says this is usually because they have learnt to be calmer and not because they have outgrown hyperhidrosis.

The condition is not life-threatening, but can affect one's ability to perform tasks with one's hands or cause embarrassment.

The condition "can be quite depressing", says Dr Kan, adding that most people suffer in silence due to embarrassment or a lack of awareness that it can be treated.



Dr Kan Yuk Man, a surgeon who specialises in treating sweaty palms. ST PHOTO: OSMOND CHIA

In extreme cases, sweaty palms can pose a hazard at the workplace, such as for soldiers who handle weapons.

The only permanent treatment for hyperhidrosis is surgery to cut a nerve near the spine that stimulates sweating, and this is commonly used to treat sweaty palms.

NSC senior consultant Tey Hong Liang says surgery should be a "last resort" as it can cause compensatory sweating in other parts of the body.