Patient Information

Royal Devon University Healthcare
NHS Foundation Trust

Dermatology - RD&E Heavitree

Iontophoresis Treatment for Hyperhidrosis

Introduction

Iontophoresis is a treatment for hyperhidrosis (excess sweating). Primary hyperhidrosis is a result of sympathetic hyperactivity of the eccrine sweat glands, usually in the hands, feet or armpits. Hyperhidrosis may affect almost any area of the body, face, head, chest or back.

Hyperhidrosis affects at least 1% of the population and can cause immense social and psychological effects on the sufferer. This in turn can lead to withdrawal from society, often making the person depressed or reclusive. It is thought that half of all sufferers have a genetic tendency towards excessive sweating. Most have one parent with the condition.

Excessive sweating can be due to other factors such as hyperthyroidism, malignant disease, psychiatric disorder, the menopause, obesity or the effects of medication. If sweating is generalised a routine blood test may be carried out for Liver function and thyroid.

Tap water iontophoresis

Medical Researchers believe that iontophoresis works by irritating the synapses between sweat inducing nerves and sweat glands to such an extent that sweat glands can no longer be stimulated. This works by placing the affected areas in tap water. A small electrical current is then passed through the skin. Axillae can be treated using soaked underarm sponges connected to the iontophoresis machine. This treatment is painless, non invasive and has relatively few side effects.

Mild tingling and burning can occur under therapy as well as short term skin irritation after treatment.

It is not certain on how the treatment works on the hands and feet but is thought to affect the sweat duct lining ion exchange. It is not a permanent solution to the sweating problem. Tap water iontophoresis works for 70-80% of patients. Further treatments will be needed to maintain the effect.

What the treatment involves

The treatment involves immersing your hands or feet in shallow baths of water. These baths are attached to the iontophoresis machine by electrical leads. Once sitting comfortably you can control the power on the machine yourself until you reach a sensation not unlike pins and needles. When you have reached this level your hands and /or feet remain in the baths for 15 minutes.

Sweat secretion will normalise after approximately 10 treatments.

Glycopyrrolate is an anticholinergic. This can be used if there is no or minimal improvement with tap water. Treatment for Glycopyrrolate takes 60 minutes and you will have 6 iontophoresis treatments over a 6-week period.

Benefits

You can expect temporary relief from excessive sweating varying from a few days up to several weeks. Tap water iontophoresis is a drug free treatment. If treatment is successful then home units could be purchased to conveniently self treat in the home setting.

Risks

- Removing hands or feet from the baths during treatment if the power is still on can result in a harmless yet uncomfortable electric shock. Be reassured that although this is unpleasant it is not dangerous.
- Any skin cuts on the hands or feet need to be covered with yellow soft paraffin to avoid stinging during treatment.
- Treatment cannot be given to pregnant women.
- Treatment cannot be given to those with a cardiac pacemaker or orthopaedic metal implants.
- All body piercings must be removed before treatment.

Contact numbers

Contact during week days 7:30-17:30pm (Dermatology is closed at weekends and Bank Holidays). Outside these hours please contact a walk-in centre/Emergency Department, GP or NHS Direct for advice.

- Nurse: 01392 405516 or 01392 405517 (with voicemail for messages)
- Dermatology reception: 01392 405510
- Hyperhidrosis Patient Support Group: www.hyperhidrosisuk.org
- British Association of Dermatologists. www.bad.org.uk

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