



Do We Really Need Whole-Body Deodorant?

We applied these new sticks, sprays and creams from neck to toe to see if they passed the sniff test

By Christina Ianzito, AARP



Photo Collage: AARP (Source: Getty Images)

Do I stink?

That's the question I've been forced to answer this summer as I've been inundated with full-body deodorant pitches. It started when I was watching TV one night — the energetic Shannon Klingman, 54, a former ob-gyn who created Lume (pronounced Loom-ee), her line of specially formulated deodorants meant for “pits, privates and beyond!” (Or, she sometimes says, “from the pits to the balls ... of your feet.”)

Klingman launched Lume in 2017, inspired by her patients who complained about unpleasant odors in their private areas. The concept took off, and drugstore shelves are now crammed with not only Lume, but also more recent incarnations of full-body deodorants from major players in the personal hygiene space, including Procter & Gamble and Unilever.

My usual underarm deodorant seems to be working just fine, however an objective sniff test of my worn [gym clothes](#) suggested that while my sweaty bod doesn't smell like a bed of roses, my [feet](#) are the areas of most concern, odorwise. (I enlisted the noses of family members who are frank about such things.)



(Left to right) Dove Whole Body Deo Anti-Friction Stick; Native Deodorant & Body Spray; Old Spice GentleMan's Total Body Spray; Secret Whole Body Deodorant, Dove Whole Body Deodorant Invisible Cream

Photo Collage: AARP (Source: AARP)

A not-super-scientific test of full-body deodorants

I bought a bagful of different full-body deodorants (thank you, [self-checkout machines](#)) and my not-unusually-smelly husband gamely offered to help me test them on a particularly steamy day. We sprayed or rubbed in the stuff from our necks to our [toes](#) — as if we were putting on [sunblock](#) — and took a long walk in a nearby park.

Afterward, we checked each other's stink level and realized we smelled ... like the deodorants. My arms were fragrant with peach and vanilla blossom (Secret's Whole Body Deodorant invisible cream); my legs and feet emanated coconut & vanilla (Dove Whole Body Deo invisible cream); my torso smelled like baby powder (Lume's Whole Body Deodorant "soft powder" scented invisible creme). My husband was rich with a mix of cucumber & mint (Native Deodorant & Body Spray) on the front of his body and, on his back, vanilla — or "notes of vanilla & shea," according to the can of Old Spice's GentleMan's Total Body nitro spray.

The verdict? They worked. After our sweaty [walk](#), we smelled like a couple of delicious, vanilla-infused summer salads.

A bit more scientifically (using a control!), I later slathered the bottom of my left foot with Dove's coconut & vanilla-scented Whole Body Deo Anti-Friction Stick, leaving the other foot au naturel. Post-gym, the left sock smelled quite lovely; the right one, if you held it to your nose and sniffed (as one doesn't!), was kind of gross smelling. I also tried deodorants from the other brands on my feet and they also more or less eliminated any unpleasant foot odor.

But do we need this stuff, really? And is it true, as my husband said after our walk, that “the world would be a better place if everyone smelled like coconut & vanilla”? Answers: maybe, and, yeah, probably.



Lumē Whole Body Deodorant
Courtesy of Lumē

The basics of BO

Body odor is created by the interaction between sweat and bacteria. “When your sweat leaves the body, it actually doesn’t smell,” says Zaineb Makhzoumi, M.D., a dermatologic surgeon at the University of Maryland Medical Center. “It’s the bacteria on your skin that work on and break down the sweat, that’s what causes the odor.”

Or, as a Lume ad puts it, “the stink happens because bacteria eat your sweat and start farting odors.”

Our sweat comes from different kinds of glands, with differing effects, says Susan Massick, M.D., a dermatologist at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. One is the eccrine (producing an odorless fluid that cools our bodies), another is the apocrine, which releases more fluid in times of [stress](#) or hormonal fluctuations. The latter open up into your hair follicles, and produce fatty sweat that is food for bacteria (which then, um, fart).

Apocrine glands become active in puberty, which is why little kids don’t have the unpleasant kind of scent we sometimes call BO.

The apocrine glands tend to be concentrated on certain areas of the body, particularly skin folds (underarms, underboobs, around the groin). And men are more likely to produce body odors because they have more hair follicles and therefore more apocrine secretions, according to the Cleveland Clinic. (Foods you eat, some medications and certain diseases, including [diabetes](#) and [liver disease](#), can also affect your body odor.)

Odor and aging

Age-related hormonal changes alter the bacteria on our [skin](#), affecting body odor.

Maiysha Jones, P&G’s principal scientist for North America, personal care, says in an email, “older individuals may have specific concerns, such as maintaining freshness as their mobility, [diet](#), medications and bathing habits change. They may experience odor in new areas and therefore seek a solution.”

Klingman says that when we get older, odors are more likely to occur “on the flat surfaces of our bodies, our trunk, our hairline, into our scalp,” which can be treated with an acidic bodywash.

How full-body deodorants work

The creators of these deodorants claim that their products can prevent the bacteria from producing odors – rather than just masking the smells.

Klingman says her interest in developing a deodorant began years ago when women would come to her gynecology practice “with odor concerns.” She began seeking solutions in earnest in 2017 and found that mandelic acid “metabolically paralyzed” bacteria and eliminated odor on any part of the body for as long as 72 hours. People bought it and Lume grew; the company brought in more than \$300 million in 2023 according to *Inc. magazine*.

Now, of course, the big brands have boarded that money train. Unilever (Dove) just launched its line of full-body deodorants in May. Their main odor-controlling agents are zinc neodecanoate for Dove’s antifriction stick version, and lactic acid in its invisible cream.



photo: AARP

Dermatologists' advice on using whole body deodorants

Dermatologists we spoke with don't quite get this "new rage," as Makhzoumi puts it. They basically say that if you don't stink, ignore this marketing push to deodorize your entire self. "If you don't have odors coming from certain areas of the body," she says, "there's absolutely no need to use a deodorant.... All you're doing is [exposing your skin to potential irritants](#)."

While these products are "quite safe," Makhzoumi adds, there are downsides if you have sensitive skin:

"Unfortunately I've seen a lot of people come in with rashes from these products." She points to their fragrances, which can cause contact dermatitis — itchy, irritated red patches on the skin. (Some brands offer unscented versions of their products, however.)

"I prefer people concentrate deodorants up in the armpits," Massick says, but agrees that the products are generally safe, "as long as you're using them in the appropriate areas. For example, you don't want to use them within the vagina." (The brands mentioned above also say their deodorants should only be used externally.)

Advice for odor control

- If you want to try whole-body deodorants, test a small area first to make sure you don't have skin sensitivity.
- Don't use deodorants in the vaginal or other internal areas.
- If you do notice your body producing strong odors, consider seeing a doctor; it can signal a health issue.
- Remove excess body hair, which can allow bacteria to congregate.
- Avoid using antiperspirants beyond your armpits.
- Remember that sweat and body odor (unless it's extreme) is normal and [nothing to be ashamed of](#).

For anyone with skin sensitivity, she adds, “I wouldn’t recommend the first time out applying it all over. Try a small test area, and see if there’s any issue.”

But first, “certainly see a dermatologist” if you are concerned about body odor, advises Makhzoumi, “because you might have a medical condition like a yeast infection which could be causing the odor, and you don’t just want to apply a whole-body deodorant to it.”

Some dermatologists will treat patients’ body odor with antibacterial cleansers like chlorhexidine, a disinfectant that you can use in the shower to tackle bacteria on your skin.

Stopping sweat also eliminates odors. Our usual underarm antiperspirants use a form of aluminum (often aluminum chloride) to prevent the release of sweat — but that’s not something most whole-body deodorants are designed to do (Lume has one that uses a different aluminum salt, which Klingman says is meant to be used in special circumstances, to prevent sweating, such as before a big presentation).

“Sweat is actually protective. It cools your body down,” notes Makhzoumi. “I think there’s a misconception that it’s bad for you. It’s not.”

I’m sticking with my underarm deodorant/antiperspirant, personally, but on particularly sweaty days? I might give my feet a little dose of coconut & vanilla.

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