



THE GASTROENTEROLOGY GROUP, P.A.

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EXCESSIVE GAS

Do you rush through meals or eat while under stress? Do you often enjoy baked beans, bananas or Brussels sprouts? Do you smoke cigars or wear loose-fitting dentures?

If your answer to any of these questions is “yes”, you may have had to cope with excessive intestinal gas. This problem leads to belching, a bloated feeling or passing of gas (flatus).

Excessive gas is a common problem, one physicians often are asked about. Although potentially embarrassing, it usually is harmless and often can be prevented.

WHAT CAUSES BOWEL GAS?

The amount of air you swallow and the amount of gas you produce varies. About half the gas passed as flatus represents swallowed air. Most healthy people pass gas a dozen or more times a day. But if you tend to produce more gas and often eat gas-forming foods, you could find it necessary to relieve yourself of gas as often as 50 to 100 times daily.

Of the total amount of gas in your stomach and intestines, five odorless gases (nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, hydrogen and methane) make up 99%.

Hydrogen and carbon dioxide are produced exclusively in your large intestine from the incomplete absorption of carbohydrates. Methane also arises in the large intestine but only in about 30% of people. The ability to produce methane gas tends to run in families; diet seems to have no affect. The unpleasant odor of bowel gas can be attributed to other chemicals, such as hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, indole and skatole.

COMMON COMPLAINTS

Doctors find that people who complain of gas usually describe these symptoms:

- Belching – The most common cause of intestinal gas is swallowing air. Eating quickly, gulping foods or beverages, drinking through a straw, chewing gum, sucking on candy, smoking or wearing loose dentures are all ways you can swallow air. Belching removes gas from your stomach by forcing it into your esophagus and then out of your mouth.

People who repeatedly belch regardless of what they eat or drink typically gulp down air as a nervous habit. Chronic belching actually causes the air bubble in the stomach to grow bigger; it has nothing to do with your stomach producing too much gas.

- Excessive passing of gas – Flatulence, the most socially uncomfortable complaint, is caused by a mixture of hydrogen and carbon dioxide gases that are formed in your large intestine. Bacteria produce these gases during fermentation of incompletely absorbed carbohydrates.

It's normal to incompletely absorb a variety of carbohydrate-rich foods. Beans are well-known for their gas-forming ability.

The sugars in such foods as baked beans, lima beans and lentils resist breakdown by the enzymes in your small intestine. In your large intestine, bacteria ferment these sugars and cause gas.

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Carbohydrates in flours from wheat, oats, corn and potatoes and in some fruits and vegetables also are incompletely absorbed.

In addition, people differ in their abilities to absorb lactose, the dominant sugar in milk. Most adults of African, Asian and Southern European descent lack sufficient lactase, an intestinal enzyme needed to digest and absorb lactose. The amount of lactase also decreases as you age.

About 40-50% of healthy people poorly absorb the artificial sweetener sorbitol. Eating only 10 grams of sorbitol (the amount contained in five sticks of sugarless gum) can cause gas.

IS GAS A PROBLEM? TRY THESE REMEDIES:

If you have a problem with excessive gas and if your doctor reassures you that your symptoms aren't due to other disorders, try these suggestions:

1. To reduce belching and bloating:
 - Don't force yourself to belch.
 - Limit foods and beverages that contain air, such as baked goods, whipped cream, soufflés and carbonated beverages.
 - Don't smoke, chew gum, suck on hard candy or drink through straws or narrow-mouthed bottles.
 - Eat and drink slowly.
 - Correct loose dentures.
 - Eat fewer rich foods such as fatty meats, fried foods, cream sauces, gravies and pastries. Trimming fat lessens the digestive load on the stomach and intestines and may reduce the production and retention of gas.
 - Don't lie down immediately after eating.

2. To reduce flatulence:
 - Don't eat foods that you find to be the worst offenders. Everyone's tolerance is different.
 - Use milk and milk products according to your tolerance. Most people with lactose deficiency handle the amount of lactose in ½ cup of milk as well as yogurt.
 - Don't use excessive amounts of dietetic foods or sugar-free candies and gum that contain sorbitol or mannitol.
 - Try activated charcoal pills or capsules which may help by collecting gas on their large surface area (NOTE: charcoal can turn your stools black).
 - Try products containing simethicone such as Mylanta, Riopan Plus or Mylicon. Simethicone breaks up gas bubbles by reducing surface tension.

THESE FOODS CAN GIVE YOU GAS

Some people may produce excessive gas after eating these foods:

Extremely gassy – dried beans, dried peas, baked beans, soybeans, lima beans, lentils, cabbage, radishes, onions, Brussels sprouts, sauerkraut, apricots, bananas, prunes and prune juice, raisins, whole-wheat bread, bran cereals, bran muffins, pretzels, wheat germ, milk, cream, ice cream, ice milk, sorbitol and mannitol contained in some dietetic and sugar-free foods.

Normal to moderate gassy – pastries, eggplant, potatoes, apples, citrus fruits, broccoli, cauliflower, cucumbers, tomatoes, kohlrabi and rutabaga.

Because all of these foods are important to your health, don't avoid any of them unnecessarily. Minimize gas production from high-fiber foods by gradually adding more fiber to your diet during a period of several weeks.