

Ill wind



Illustration by GRANT JEDLINSKY | The Roanoke Times

Is an epidemic of flatulence floating over the land?

By Patricia Anstett
Knight Ridder/Tribune

Let 'er rip, America: flatulence is exploding.

It's in new medical books because it afflicts millions. It's the not-so-silent theme of a popular series of children's books and a plush toy called "Walter the Farting Dog."

And it's the topic of a new Web site (www.trafon.com) that encourages open discussion about gas and that is updated monthly with seasonal and sporting-event twists.

By any name — paint peeler, pocket thunder, fog-

horn — gas gets lots of pop culture play. In 1974, a very different kind of cowboy movie, "Blazing Saddles," rocketed its way to classic status with a campfire scene of gas-passing cowboys. Gas has since continued to be a funny joke, a perennial favorite of stand-up comics, cartoons and guy movies.

Need convincing of its popularity? Google "farting." You might be aghast.

The biggest push of late comes from Bill Downs, a nutritional supplements developer whose www.trafon.com — "no fart" spelled backward — has

picked up velocity and media coverage since he launched it Dec. 20, just in time to warn folks about gas-producing holiday foods.

The site provides advice, humor and links to anonymous gas-themed greeting cards. "I want to create awareness ... but I feel I needed a humorous portal," said Downs, who at 54 says it's fair to call him an "old fart."

Though he uses humor, his motivation to educate people about the gastrointestinal tract is serious. Downs' mother died of colon cancer and a cousin died of compli-

cations from Crohn's disease, a gastrointestinal disorder.

With help from a public relations team that finds seasonal and newsy angles for everything from the Super Bowl to Valentine's Day, Downs hopes to spread the word that gas is normal and often treatable with dietary changes, even though it can be a painful and embarrassing reality to those who live with it.

Over the breakfast table, someone surely will take offense at the topic of gas, as if writing about it were as noxious as passing it.

So today, be educated. We

all live with gas. Consider the following your owner's manual.

■ You're normal if you pass gas 10 to 20 times a day. The count comes from studies by Dr. Michael Levitt of the Minneapolis Veterans Administration Hospital, who fed beans to willing subjects and had researchers count away.

■ The bad news is, never break wind and think you won't be heard. Most farts come with a noise. Sometimes it's a toot; sometimes

WIND: Sulfur's a culprit

much more.

■ You also may break wind more when you're slouching or reclining, so sit up. Be forewarned about aerobics classes and bedtime activities with partners.

■ It's not unusual to pass gas in the morning because it accumulates overnight. And — no surprise here — eating a meal also stimulates gas production.

■ We're happy to report that not all gas carries a smell. What's eaten and how fast it is consumed account for whether it's odorless or deadly.

■ The experts say there are no gender differences. So there, ladies.

Women are notorious for holding in gas. Not a good idea, the experts say. It can

cause bloating and stomach pain and actually stretch the intestines. What women do right is head to the bathroom and stay there until the gas subsides.

■ Flatus is the official term. That's FLAY-tus, not FLAT-us, according to Webster.

Flatulence occurs when food is not broken down properly in the small bowel, where most food is digested. The amount of air we swallow when we eat or drink and how quickly we consume food also may be a factor, along with sensitivities to foods such as dairy and wheat products.

■ If there were an Oscar for fart causes, it would go to sulfur-rich foods: beans, broccoli, brussels sprouts, asparagus, carrots, rai-

sins, bananas, onions, milk and other dairy products. Soaking beans for at least 12 hours reduces their tendency to cause gas.

Equally problematic: whole-grain foods, including bagels; and sugar products, particularly colas, starches and alcohol. Using a straw or chewing gum also may contribute to problems because they bring in more air.

Avoid bottom-of-the-food-chain items such as chips, pizza, cheesy dips and processed foods — all often eaten by people watching sports. Excess consumption of these items constitutes "unsportsmanlike flatulence," Downs says.

"Passing the football is OK, but passing gas — that's an interference penalty."