

TIMES ♦ LEADER

Clearing the Air

NOT ALWAYS A LAUGHING MATTER

For millions of Americans, gas accompanied by other symptoms, such as bleeding, weight loss, vomiting or diarrhea, is a sign of chronic disease. There's nothing funny about it. For some people, it may be hard to detect the difference between gas and a bowel movement. The brain can get downright confused. But there are ways to help yourself.

Celiac disease

Prompts gas and digestive problems in people because of an intolerance to gluten, can be helped by eliminating certain foods.

A new book, "Celiac Disease, A Hidden Epidemic" by Dr. Peter Green and Rory Jones (Collins, \$22.95), provides insights about non-food sources of gluten found in herbal supplements, drugs and cosmetics. It's important to know, too, that people who think they have celiac disease sometimes find they don't when they switch from wheat-based to rice-based products, says Dr. Jeffrey Barnett, a gastroenterologist at St. Joseph Mercy Health System in Superior Township. They learn they can control gas by avoiding wheat products.

Irritable bowel syndrome

A cluster of gastrointestinal disorders, as well as neuropathy, scleroderma and other diseases, also may cause gassiness. A study released in February in the Journal of Gastroenterology found that rifaximin, a drug used to treat diarrhea, was effective in treating abdominal bloating and gas in IBS patients. Three books released since December to consider are:

"**IBS for Dummies**" by Dr. Carolyn Dean and L. Christine Wheeler (Wiley, \$19.99).

"**A New IBS Solution, Bacteria - The Missing Link in Treating Irritable Bowel Syndrome**" by Dr. Mark Pimentel (Health Point Press, \$19.95).

"**The Purification Plan**" by Dr. Peter Bennett, a naturopathic doctor who has devised a seven-day detox plan (Rodale; \$16.95).



Now out in the open, flatulence a topic that shows little sign of running out of gas

By PATRICIA ANSTETT
Detroit Free Press

Let'er-rip America, flatulence is exploding.

It's in new medical books for millions of people with the problem.

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, fart or foghorn — 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 farting 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 nutraceutical supplements developer whose www.trafon.com — "no fart" spelled backward — has picked up velocity and media coverage since he launched it Dec. 20, 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," says Downs, 54, who 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 complications 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.

We know there's a risk with the serious topic we address today. Over the morning oat bran, someone surely will

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take offense at the topic of gas, as if writing about it is as noxious as the act of passing gas itself.

So today, be educated. We all live with gas, as you soon shall find out.

Consider this your owner's manual, the ultimate bathroom reading.

And now, with those caveats, take out your air freshener, put on your windbreaker and take a listen.

You are normal if ...

Consider yourself normal if you pass gas 10-20 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.

We tried to reach Levitt but are sorry to report that he has removed every whiff of himself from the scene. "He ran into a few problems with the topic. He'll have to pass," said a woman answering the phone in his office.

The bad news is, never fart and think you won't be heard. Most farts come with a noise. Sometimes it's a toot; sometimes it's a real trouser ripper.

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

It's not unusual to pass gas upon awakening because it accumulates overnight. And, no surprise here, eating a meal also stimulates gas production. Eating sends a signal to the brain to get going, experts say.

Silent? No. Deadly? Perhaps. Phew. 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 deadly or odorless.

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 wait 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 they had given out an Oscar for farting, it would have gone to sulfur-rich foods: beans, broccoli, brussels sprouts, asparagus (talk about the greenhouse effect), carrots, raisins, 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-end-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."

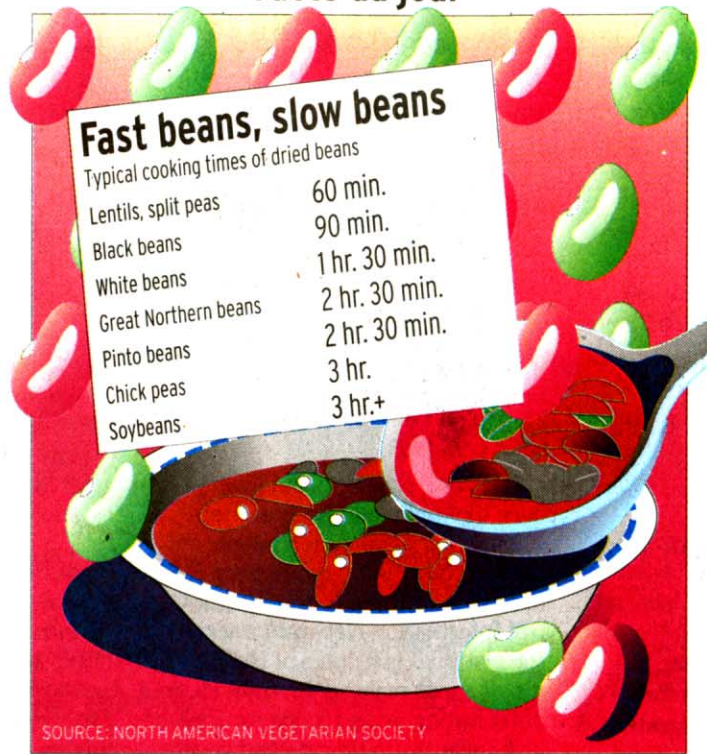
For a closer look at gas-producing foods, go to the National Institutes of Health Web site <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/gas/whichfoods>.

Some drugs, including certain antidepressants, can give you gas. Check with your doctor about switching to a different drug in the class that is less known to make you gassy. In addition, many drugs contain starch as a binding ingredient. Check the label or ask your pharmacist.

There's little evidence to support their use, "certainly not for gassiness," says Dr. Jeffrey Barnett, a gastroenterologist at St. Joseph Mercy Health System in Superior Township, Mich. Products like Beano (\$10.19 for 0.51 ounces of liquid) may help with gassiness but not bloating or cramps, he says. Pepto-Bismol may reduce the hydrogen sulfide that causes smellier gas but that can, in turn, cause constipation, he says.

Sources: Dr. Jeffrey Barnett and the American College of Gastroenterology Web site, www.acg.gi.org

Facts du jour



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