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Don't be embarrassed: Though smelly, it's healthy

Long taboo, flatulence is being discussed everywhere these days.

By Patricia Anstett
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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.

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

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.

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.

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

It's 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.

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

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.

IBS

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.

Babies and gas

Turns out that as many as half of all babies spend the first few months of their lives gassy, or, as otherwise known, colicky. Obvious signs include babies who cry excessively, pull up their legs or curl up.

To help, burp babies frequently during feedings, every three to five minutes. Hold your babies upright against your shoulder when burping them or facedown across your lap or upright on your lap while supporting the neck and chest. If you are breast-feeding, avoid gas-causing foods. (See main story.) If you aren't breast-feeding, avoid cow's milk if your baby is gassy. Don't jostle and play with babies after feeding them.

You can also try the gas hold. Hold the baby facedown on your arm and walk around with him or her, avoid jostling.

If none of that works, try an over-the-counter product: Mylicon Gas Relief Drops. Around for 30 years, the product contains no alcohol, saccharin or aspartame. (The suggested retail price is \$6.99 for a half-ounce bottle of 50 doses or \$11.99 for a 1-ounce bottle of 100 doses).

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 chew-

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