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HEALTH & SCIENCE

Let 'er rip, America

Long a taboo topic, flatulence is being discussed everywhere these days

By Patricia Anstett
Detroit Free Press

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 nutriceutical 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," said 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.

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.

Consider yourself 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.

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.

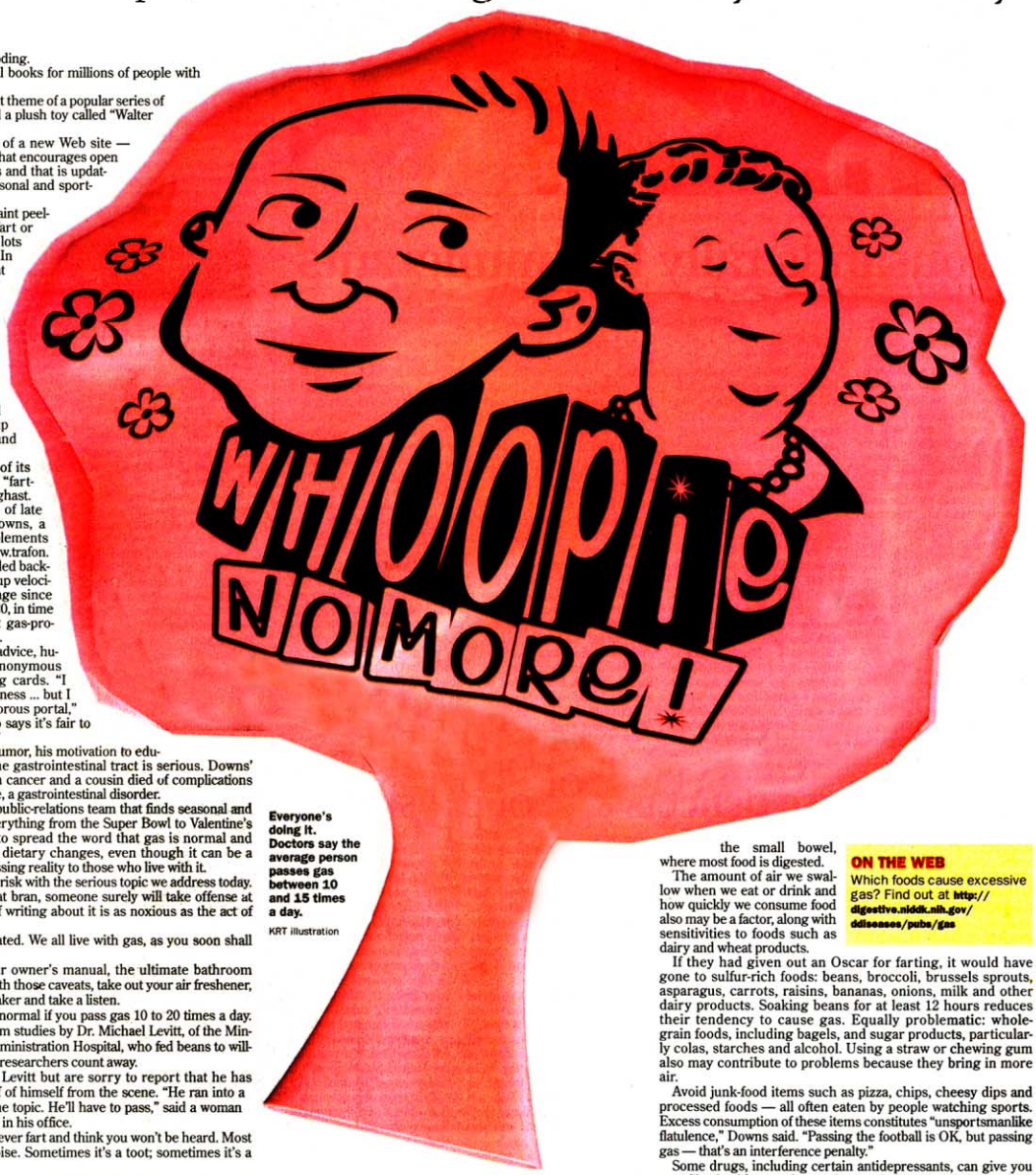
You also may fart more when you're slouching or reclining, so sit up. Be forewarned about aerobics class and bedtime activities with partners.

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.



Everyone's doing it. Doctors say the average person passes gas between 10 and 15 times a day.
KRT illustration

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.

ON THE WEB
Which foods cause excessive gas? Find out at **http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/gas**

If they had given out an Oscar for farting, it would have gone to sulfur-rich foods: beans, broccoli, brussels sprouts, asparagus, carrots, raisins, bananas, onions, milk and other dairy products. Soaking beans for at least 12 hours reduces their tendency to cause gas. Equally problematic: wholegrain 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 junk-food items such as pizza, chips, cheesy dips and processed foods — all often eaten by people watching sports. Excess consumption of these items constitutes "unsportsmanlike flatulence," Downs said. "Passing the football is OK, but passing gas — that's an interference penalty."

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," said Dr. Jeffrey Barnett, a gastroenterologist at St. Joseph Mercy Health System in Superior Township, Mich.

Products such as Beano may help with gassiness but not bloating or cramps, he said. Pepto-Bismol may reduce the hydrogen sulfide that causes smellier gas but that can, in turn, cause constipation, he added.