

THE PLAIN DEALER

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2005

HEALTH

Holiday food fuels gas trouble

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Newhouse News Service

The crowded room is decked out in its seasonal best, as are your fellow partyers. There you are, chatting away, your buffet plate bulging with rich goodies. And then you feel it — the bloated beginning of a rumble in your abdomen.

Not gas. No, no, no, not now.

This may be, as the song proclaims, “the most wonderful time of the year,” but face it, it’s also the gassiest. Everyone is offering — and eagerly devouring — high-calorie, yeasty, sugar- and alcohol-laden treats. Entire parties center on tables of foods that challenge the healthiest digestive systems.

But for folks with gastrointestinal problems, this season can be perilous. The thought of embarrassing gas keeps many in their homes, and drives others to try the myriad products popping up to help them cope.

According to the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders, millions of all ages are affected. One malady alone, irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, plagues up to 20 percent of adults. Other problems — celiac disease, lactose intolerance, diverticulitis, food allergies — can lead to isolation.

“Some people avoid social situations out of embarrassment or

fear that an episode is imminent,” said Audra Baade of the nonprofit foundation, based in Milwaukee. One of its surveys revealed that 68 percent of IBS sufferers “missed leisure activities” due to pain, diarrhea or constipation, and gas.

Gas is particularly tough to hide after overindulging.

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“Four helpings of stuffing, two plates of turkey or roast beef, that’s begging for an explosive response,” said Bill Downs, who blogs about flatulence with a touch of humor at trafon.blogspot.com. (Motto: “Trafon, spell it backward!”)

Downs, of Lederach, Pa., has a background in nutritional biochemistry and years ago had a clinical nutrition practice. He noticed that nearly all the patients struggled with gas.

“Although it’s a cultural phenomenon that fosters embarrassment and humor, it is, in my opinion, one of the most serious health issues,” Downs said.

His holiday advice: “Watching your diet is crucial, unless you want to develop a new career as a flatulence master.”

For instance, dairy combined with “easily fermentable starches” — say, cheese and bread — is “a formula for explosive fun.” Sugar alcohols used to

sweeten treats cause “a dramatic increase in gas.”

Of course, refusing holiday treats is tough. That’s why this is a busy season at Flat-D Innovations Inc., in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

“This is our best time of year; we do huge sales,” said Frank Morosky of Flat-D, which is among companies offering gas-deodorizing, activated-charcoal pads and products. “Mainly because people are with family in close quarters, like watching football games together. Or traveling, sitting on planes or in the car next to each other.”

The firm’s biggest seller is a reusable underwear pad that absorbs gas (\$12.95, details at www.flat-d.com).

For embarrassment specifically centered on the bathroom, William Edwards sells The Drops through his company, Toilex, based in Valparaiso, Ind. (More at www.thedrops.com.)

“I’ve heard of people at their family’s house saying they have to go to the store, then going and finding a bathroom to use somewhere else” to avoid smelling up the place, Edwards said.

The Drops’ discreet vial may be carried in a pocket or purse. The user drips several drops into the toilet water before sitting down, coating its surface. “When you sit on a toilet, you actually create a seal,” Edwards explained. “This cancels out the smell before it starts.”