

Understanding Gas and Eliminating It

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Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

It is perfectly natural, we all have it, yet it can be both uncomfortable and highly embarrassing. “It” is gas, a by-product of the breakdown of food during digestion. The belching and flatulence that result are simply your body’s way of ridding itself of excess gas that otherwise can build up in the stomach and intestines and cause bloating.

“Belching rids the body of excess air from the stomach,” said Lisa Cook, R.N., of the Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association. “A fair proportion of that excess, although you’re probably completely unaware of it, is air that you’ve swallowed,” she said.

You’re more likely to swallow air if you chew gum or suck on hard candy, smoke, drink through a straw, talk while eating or eat or drink too fast. Poorly fitting dentures can also cause you to swallow air. Drinking beer or carbonated beverages adds extra carbon dioxide to the mix. While fatty foods don’t directly cause gas, they can slow down the emptying of the stomach, which is a contributing factor.

Intestinal gas is caused by the fermentation of undigested food in the colon. Milk products and the gluten in wheat products can add to the problem for those whose digestive systems have particular difficulty breaking these substances down.

Intestinal gas may also be due to antibiotics that kill off the beneficial flora in the digestive system, constipation, or swallowed air that has migrated to the colon.

Diet Matters

It’s one of life’s little ironies that many of the most nutritious foods are the biggest culprits in creating excess gas. These include all those healthful cruciferous vegetables—cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and cauliflower. Other gas producers are lettuce, onions, peas, asparagus, whole grains, beans and lentils. Even apples, pears, bananas, raisins and peaches can be offenders.

The Mayo Clinic suggests that if these foods are causing your digestive system to rebel eliminate these and other high-fiber foods from your diet for a short time, reintroducing them gradually. Other strategies that might be helpful are getting more exercise, making a real effort to ensure that mealtime is relaxing, eating slowly and chewing thoroughly.

Adjusting your eating and exercise habits may be all you need to do to relieve mild or occasional bouts of gas, but, Cook said, “severe or persistent gas may be a sign of a digestive disorder such as lactose intolerance or irritable bowel syndrome that your doctor should evaluate.”

Some people mistake the normal passage of gas as excessive and believe they have a problem when they’re actually just fine. But, if excessive belching or flatulence isn’t alleviated by changing your diet or is accompanied by fever, weight loss, blood in stools, diarrhea, constipation, nausea, or persistent heartburn, you need medical advice.

“Excessive or chronic belching or flatulence can be a signal of something more serious such as gastritis or a peptic ulcer,” said Cook. “So if it’s really a problem you should make sure your doctor is aware of it.”

Medication May Help

As television ads make abundantly clear, there are any number of over-the-counter (OTC) remedies for gas troubles, and they are often effective. Most antacids contain simethicone, which produces a foaming agent that helps sufferers belch the gas away, but they are not effective in relieving intestinal gas.

Activated charcoal tablets, available OTC, may help, though. Some studies indicate that intestinal gas is markedly reduced when the tablets are taken before and after meals. Charcoal tablets can interfere with the absorption of certain other medications, however, so follow your doctor’s or pharmacist’s instructions carefully.

There are a number of other OTC remedies that can prevent gas or relieve it once it starts. Lactase supplements, containing enzymes that digest carbohydrates, may enable those with sensitive systems to enjoy foods that normally cause them trouble. There are several prescription possibilities your doctor may recommend.