

MANAGING BLOATING AND WIND

INTRODUCTION

Bloating and wind are very common symptoms. Although they are rarely signs of serious illness they can be very distressing and embarrassing to the sufferer. They may be associated with organic diseases of the colon including inflammatory disorders such as Crohn's Disease, Ulcerative Colitis, diverticular disease and infective colitis. They may be associated with malabsorption syndromes and food intolerances. Most often there is no underlying pathology within the bowel and the symptoms simply reflect a functional abnormality of the bowel. Such conditions are usually described under the general term 'Irritable Bowel Syndrome'.

This information sheet answers some of the queries most often raised about bloating and wind. It also contains suggestions and tips some people have found useful in managing these symptoms.

WHAT CAUSES BLOATING AND WIND?

There are several possible explanations for bloating and wind. A major cause of bloating is gas. Gas can be trapped in the stomach and intestines (bowels) to cause bloating, or can be expelled as wind (flatus). It has been suggested that bloating is more likely to occur if you have constipation. Eating a lot of fatty food can delay stomach emptying, and this too may cause bloating and discomfort. You may also experience bloating if you have adhesions (scar tissue) as a result of previous surgery.

WHAT CAUSES GAS?

It is normal to have gas in your intestine. We all produce several litres of gas a day through the normal processes of digestion. Some of this is reabsorbed into the bloodstream and eventually breathed out, the remainder has to be expelled as wind. Most of us probably break wind on average 15 times a day, even if we are unaware of it. Sometimes we

have less control of wind, this can happen as the anal sphincter weakens with age or because of distortions of the anal canal due to haemorrhoids. As control weakens we can become more aware of the passage of wind even if the amount of wind is no different

One possible cause of excess gas is swallowing too much air when eating, drinking or talking (aerophagia). Certain foods and fizzy drinks can also contribute to this. Smoking can also contribute to the amount of air that you swallow. Some people swallow air as a nervous reaction.

Excess gas can also be caused by the normal bacteria in the colon producing too much gas when they break down certain foods. Foods containing complex carbohydrates, for example vegetables such as beans, cabbage and Brussels sprouts, are difficult for the human body to digest. They are broken down by the gas-producing bacteria instead. Foods that contain sorbitol, an artificial sweetener, can cause similar problems. Poor absorption of food by the small intestine means that more undigested food reaches the colon, where bacteria can digest it to produce even more gas. Malabsorption can occur following an attack of gastroenteritis or can be found in patients with Crohns disease affecting the small bowel.

Lactose intolerance (difficulty with digesting lactose - a sugar found in milk) can cause gas. Lactose intolerance is caused by lack of the enzyme lactase in the intestine which means that the body cannot break down the lactose. Instead, it is fermented by the gas-producing bacteria in the colon.

It has also been suggested that some people may simply have more bacteria than others, or bacteria that produce more gas.

HOW CAN I REDUCE EXCESS GAS?

Unfortunately, there is no simple solution - what works for one person may not work for another. However, some people have found the following ideas helpful:

Think about the way you eat

Create a relaxed environment when eating, as nervous tension at meal times can affect digestion.

Eat small, regular meals (perhaps 5-6 a day), as an empty bowel produces more wind and rumbles.

Some people find that eating a large meal late at night makes them feel uncomfortable. If you find this is the case for you, try to leave a longer time between eating and going to bed, to see if this helps.

Eat slowly with your mouth closed to avoid gulping down air with your food, and make sure you chew each mouthful thoroughly.

Avoid foods that may affect you

Some foods, such as baked beans, onions, cauliflower, pulses, and whole grains are well known to be 'gassy'. Although what produces a lot of wind for one person may not for another. You could also try avoiding:

- High fat foods and eggs – these can produce bad smelling gas.
- Refined and sugary foods, especially those which contain sorbitol – an artificial sweetener.
- Hot spicy food, particularly if you are not used to it.
- Food with a high content of bran fibre (for example, brown bread and some cereals).
- Raw vegetables, particularly if you have Crohn's Disease and strictures (narrowing of the bowel). Cooking vegetables thoroughly helps to break down the fibres, which may aid digestion, and may improve bloating and wind symptoms.
- Some carbohydrate foods which are cooked and then cooled become 'resistant starch' which may cause bloating and wind, when eaten.
- Such foods include potato or pasta, and cooked potato products that are eaten after reheating, such as potato waffles and oven chips.

You may know that you have an intolerance or are sensitive to certain foods or ingredients. If you are having a problem identifying which foods are causing bloating and wind, it can be helpful to keep a food diary for a week or two. Note down everything you eat and drink and how it makes you feel.

It may be worth experimenting by cutting out certain foods for a short period (4-6 weeks) to see if this helps. However, bear in mind that cutting out a number of foods can mean missing out on valuable nutrients. It is important, if you can, to maintain a good balanced diet. Consulting your doctor is also a good idea if you suspect you may be lactose intolerant. There are several types and levels of intolerance, and correct diagnosis is essential to identify the right solution.

Some people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) have found that eating a low FODMAP diet helps reduce bloating and wind. FODMAP is an abbreviation for a group of food molecules known as fermentable carbohydrates which are found in foods such as fruit, wheat and dairy products. These molecules are difficult to digest properly, so the undigested molecules pass into the colon where they act as a food source for bacteria. As the bacteria digest the FODMAPs they can cause symptoms such as bloating and wind. Cutting down food containing FODMAPs is thought to relieve these symptoms, and many people with IBS have found low FODMAP diets especially useful. However, the FODMAP diet is quite restrictive and difficult to follow, so if you want to try it, you should get the help of a dietitian to ensure you do not miss out on important nutrients.

Drinking

Drink plenty of water, ideally 2 litres per day for a woman, and 2.5 litres per day for a man, dependent on age, climate, physical activity and individual condition. Also:

- Avoid caffeine in coffee, tea and cola. You could try decaffeinated tea, peppermint tea, green tea, or herbal and fruit teas instead.
- Avoid fizzy carbonated drinks because these contain gas.
- Alcoholic drinks can also increase the amount of gas produced.
- Avoid drinking from a straw as this can make you swallow air.

Other tips

Try to avoid stress, which can make you gulp air. When you are tense, practise slow breathing. Also:

- Avoid sitting for long periods. If sitting at work, take regular breaks (at least every hour) to stretch the legs and abdomen.
- Try to take regular exercise to help improve intestinal transit, for example, it may help to go for a short walk after eating in order to move digested food and gas around.
- Gently, but firmly, massage the abdomen from right to left to release trapped wind.
- Practise anal sphincter exercises to help with uncontrollable passing of wind.
- Wear clothes that are not too tight around your waist, as these can increase the pressure on your abdomen and make it harder for wind to pass along normally.

HOW CAN I GET RID OF SMELLS?

We are often a lot more sensitive to our own smells than other people are. However, if you are concerned about odours, you might find some of the ideas on the following page helpful. Try to ensure that the room you are in is well ventilated. Light a scented candle, an aromatherapy oil burner (try lavender or lemon oil) or incense stick. Some people find that aerosol air fresheners can help mask smells. Try a solid block freshener that works all the time, or a freshener that releases a fragrance at regular intervals. Use neutralising sprays or gels that help eliminate rather than mask odours, such as Neutradol Spray or Gel (available from chemists and supermarkets), Auricare Odour Eliminator, or Fresh Drop Smell Stop (available online). Wear underwear or pads that absorb gas. These are available online at www.flat-d.com and www.myshreddies.com. Use a seat cushion that filters gas. This is available from www.gasbgon.com.

WHAT ELSE MAY RELIEVE SYMPTOMS?

Some people have found herbal remedies helpful in reducing wind. You should tell your doctor if you are taking any herbal remedies. The following suggestions have not been scientifically proven to relieve symptoms, but may be worth trying.

- Aloe Vera gels
- Charcoal tablets
- Cranberry juice
- Fresh parsley
- Herbal infusions, such as camomile, fennel or peppermint
- Peppermint oil

Some people find that simethicone helps with bloating and wind. Simethicone is an anti-foaming agent, which disperses tiny bubbles of trapped wind. It can be brought over the counter in products such as Wind-Eze tablets and WindSetlers.

Some people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) have found that some probiotics are helpful in reducing flatulence and wind. Probiotics are a mixture of live 'friendly' (beneficial) bacteria taken by mouth. They can be found in some specially fermented yogurt drinks or in tablet form.