



GASTROINTESTINAL GAS

Gastrointestinal Gas

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Gas in the gastrointestinal tract is normal. Passage of gas by belching or as flatus (gas per rectum) is normal. Gas in the digestive tract comes from two main sources - swallowed air and through the breakdown of certain undigested foods. Gas is produced by the breakdown of these foods by bacteria normally present in the large intestine. Swallowed air is a common cause of gas in the stomach. A small amount of air is swallowed with eating and drinking, particularly when eating or drinking quickly. Loose dentures, chewing gum and smoking also increase the amount of air swallowed.

Some carbohydrates (sugar, starches and fibre) are not digested and absorbed by the intestine, and can thus be digested by normal bacteria. The gases produced are usually hydrogen, carbon dioxide and methane. Sugars that typically cause extra gas production are raffinose, lactose, fructose and sorbitol. Raffinose is found in beans and to a smaller degree in cabbage and whole grains. Lactose is the natural sugar in milk. Fructose is present in onions, pears and wheat, and is used as a sweetener in fruit drinks. Sorbitol may be used as a sweetener in sugar-free candies and gum but is also found naturally in fruits such as apples, pears and peaches. Most starches including potatoes and wheat will produce some gas. Fibre occurs in two main forms — soluble and insoluble. Soluble fibre in oat bran and most fruits is not broken down until it reaches the large intestine, whereas insoluble fibre in wheat bran and some vegetables produces very little gas.

Symptoms of belching, flatulence, bloating and abdominal discomfort may not be due to excess quantities or types of gas but rather may be due to altered or heightened intestinal sensitivity to normal gas. There is no specific test to diagnose intestinal gas, although new symptoms should be reported to your physician and investigated as appropriate. Taking a careful dietary history may identify certain foods that may contribute to your symptoms, such as dairy foods for those with lactose intolerance or artificial sweeteners. An adjustment in your diet may be all that is necessary.

Several over-the-counter medications may help selected individuals. Lactase supplements will help if you are lactose intolerant. Lactose-reduced milk and other dairy products may be of benefit as well.

Certain antacids contain simethicone, a foaming agent that may help with gas in the stomach. Activated charcoal tablets may provide some relief from gas in the colon. The tablets are taken with and after meals. Alpha-D-galactosidase contains a sugar-digesting enzyme that helps to digest the sugar in beans and some vegetables but has no effect on gas produced from lactose.

Minimizing gum chewing and stopping smoking will help if these are relevant issues in your case.

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Minimizing or eliminating foods sweetened with sorbitol may also help. Eliminating carbonated drinks such as soda should help. As well, carbonated soft drinks can probably be consumed if they have been opened for a period of time to let the gas bubbles escape. As always, new or persistent symptoms should be discussed with your physician.



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