

Intestinal Gas (Flatulence)

What is intestinal gas?

Intestinal gas is the passage of air or gas from the intestines out through the rectum. The air or gas is called flatus. Another term for passing gas is flatulence.

It is normal to have some gas. The average person passes gas 8 to 20 times a day. Gas is usually a problem only when the gas smells foul or happens often or at inconvenient times.

What is the cause?

Some of the gas in the intestine is air that you have swallowed. You may swallow large amounts of air with your food, especially if you eat or drink quickly. Babies swallow air when crying or feeding. Some people have a nervous habit of swallowing air all day, especially in times of stress. If you are in an upright position, swallowed air can pass back up from your stomach and be released through your mouth in a belch. However, each time you belch, you swallow more air, so the belching is likely to continue. When you lie down, the air may instead pass on through the intestines and out of the rectum.

The other cause of gas in the intestines is the digestive process itself. Bacteria in the intestines make gas as they break down food residues. Some foods are more likely to produce intestinal gas than others, and some medicines that cause constipation can make intestinal gas more frequent or painful. Gas formed by bacteria in the digestive process is always passed through the rectum rather than the mouth.

A common digestion problem that causes gas is lactose intolerance. Many people lose the ability to digest milk as they grow up. This happens because their bodies stop making lactase, which is an enzyme that digests milk sugar (lactose). People who don't make enough lactase typically have abdominal pain and gas, even diarrhea, when they eat or drink milk or other dairy products that contain lactose.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of intestinal gas are:

- Frequent passage of gas out of the rectum
- Abdominal discomfort that is relieved by the passage of gas

How is it treated?

Intestinal gas can be treated with the following measures:

- Try to eat and drink more slowly so you swallow less air with your food.
- Change your diet. Avoid foods that are known to cause a lot of gas.
- Nonprescription medicine that contains simethicone may help (for example, Gas X, Mylicon, and Mylanta).

How can I take care of myself?

You should first realize that some gas is normal. Try not to let it bother you. The more you worry about it, the more air you are likely to swallow.

Recognizing that you are swallowing air is the first step in controlling the habit of swallowing air. Chew your food longer and sip fluids slowly. Try to avoid frequent sighing or chewing gum, either of which can cause you to swallow air.

A change in diet often can help you have less intestinal gas. Try to eat a more varied diet and notice which foods cause gas. If gas becomes a problem after eating any particular food, you may want to avoid that food. The foods that cause gas vary from person to person. Some groups of foods that commonly cause gas are:

- Dairy products (except yogurt)
- Vegetables such as beans, cauliflower, peas, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, cabbage, and onions
- Bran and whole grains, especially if you are not used to eating bran or whole grains or have eaten a much larger portion than usual
- Fruits such as pears, apples, and peaches
- Carbonated drinks and beer
- Dried fruits
- Sugar substitutes, such as sorbitol, in sugar-free foods and candies

A change in eating habits and diet will usually take care of most gas problems. You can try eliminating one group of the above foods at a time and see if the gas problem gets better.

Many nonprescription medicines are available to help reduce symptoms, including antacids with simethicone and activated charcoal. Digestive enzymes, such as lactase supplements, help digest carbohydrates and may allow you to eat foods that normally cause gas. If the condition continues, however, see your healthcare provider to check for other possible causes, such as other medicines you are taking.

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