



Medicine for Managers

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Why Do I Pass Wind?

For those fans of *Trivial Pursuit* let me ask “what do we all do 15-20 times a day”? The answer; pass wind. Known medically as flatulence when passed upwards and as flatus when passed downwards, it has many other colourful names. It is a natural function which, in society, is often concealed or suppressed. A source of humour, everyone of a certain age will recall Peter Sellers’ ‘Wind in a Lift’.

The production of wind is a natural process and often is the consequence of swallowing air or through the gas-producing effects of bacteria in the large bowel. It is said that we all pass between three and four litres of gas a day.

Swallowing air is usually the consequence of gulping down food or liquids, which inevitably include small quantities of air.

The gas can also build up in the stomach as part of a biological process during the initial breakdown and digestion of food. The passage of wind in the form of a burp is called flatulence.

Foodstuffs passing through the intestine which have not been fully digested in the small bowel will then be broken down by the bacteria present in the large bowel.

The gases manufactured as by-products of bacterial activity include hydrogen, carbon dioxide and methane.

Sometimes, passing wind is not associated with any odours whilst on other occasions a sulphurous odour may be detected if any of the gas formed is hydrogen sulphide (bad eggs) as a result of bacterial action.

It is hard to forget the Northern comedian Les Dawson and his brilliant one-liners – “I went to see the doctor and asked him for something for wind. He gave me a kite”

Having an odour is not normally a sign of abnormality. Passing wind downwards is called flatus although other terminology is frequently used.

The production of excessive wind in the bowel is associated with bloating or distension and may result in abdominal pain which is only relieved when the sufferer is able to pass wind, usually downwards.

So, the passage of wind is completely normal but its presence can on occasion herald something more significant which may require medical attention.

Additional symptoms might be:

1. Very offensive and persistent wind
2. A period of persistent change in bowel habit
3. Persistent associated diarrhoea or constipation
4. Abdominal pain or distension
5. The loss of blood either with vomiting or in the stool
6. Other signs of ill-health such as unexplained weight loss, loss of appetite, persistent raised temperature or generalised aches and pains.

Irritable bowel syndrome, which affects a quarter of the population, is frequently associated with excessive flatus.

For many people flatulence or flatus can be distressing or embarrassing. If it is related to an underlying condition then treatment or management of the condition may result in resolution of the problem.

In the case of irritable bowel, the use of probiotic yoghurts may be of assistance by assisting with the colonisation in the gut of the so-called 'friendly bacteria' which assist with the breakdown of food stuffs.

Other ways to try to control the problem are:

Attention to Diet

1. Avoiding foods that cause flatulence or flatus
e.g. fizzy drinks, foods containing artificial sweeteners and chewing gum.

For many people particular foods, though often enjoyable, are known to cause problems. It is important to have a healthy diet and to include the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

Many, such as potatoes, rice and citrus fruits, bananas and grapes are easy to digest. Interestingly, different people have different experiences in terms of the degree of wind generated by a particular foodstuff.

Sometimes more frequent, smaller meals are less wind-producing than larger meals.

Medication

There are a number of products available from pharmacies and health food shops which are marketed as assisting in the management of flatulence and include such agents as antacids and ginger.

Activated charcoal tablets may assist with flatus problems and is thought to work the same way as a charcoal filter over a kitchen hob, absorbing gas and reducing downward wind. Another drug which may sometimes

be effective is simeticone (marketed as *Deflatine* and *Wind-Eze*).

Swallowing Air

Everyone swallows air with food but gulping down food tends to take more air with it. Thoroughly chewing food slowly will reduce the amount of air taken in.

Other factors may be smoking, which increases air swallowed and does in any case irritate the digestive system, and chewing gum.

Loose dentures may also aggravate the problem by inhibiting effective chewing of food.

Issues around passing wind are not often publicised and, though considered impolite but humorous, are not documented.

However, as early as the fifth century BC, the playwright Aristophanes used jokes about passing wind in his plays.

The Roman Emperor Elagabalus was believed to play jokes on dinner guests using an early type of whoopee cushion.

In the UK, Geoffrey Chaucer included flatus humour in his *Miller's Tale* and the *Summoner's Tale*. These days many comedians resort to comments about wind for their humour.

More information about the problems of intestinal gas is available in the book '*Blame It On The Dog*' by Jim Dawson.

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