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Flatulence: The Gas We Pass

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By Joyce Furstenau



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Joseph Pujol (*Le_Petomane*) at a "concert."

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"Cut the cheese," "pass gas," and "fart" are all clever ways we humans have come up with to talk about FLATULENCE. Flatulence is described in Wikipedia as "the expulsion through the rectum of a mixture of gases that are byproducts of the digestion process of mammals and other animals." Passing gas is a normal bodily function. In fact, it is an important signal of normal bowel activity. Everyone from the Queen of England to the U.S. President has gas, also known as *flatus* (pronounced FLAY tuss). The average person has a "flatus event" up to fourteen times each day.



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Most of the gas we make is absorbed through the walls of our intestines, but sometimes, oops, one or two of these gas bubbles sneak out. Flatulence is what happens when the food we eat creates gas in our intestines. Sometimes it comes from swallowed air that never got burped out. Other times, some of the food we eat isn't broken down in the stomach. The undigested food proceeds through our intestines where bacteria pitch in to help. One byproduct of that breakdown is gas.

Certain foods can make your "airborne experiences" smell bad, too. Ugh! Beans, bran, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, cabbage, carbonated beverages, cauliflower, dairy products, and even white bread can add to the stinkiness of the air around you. Beans contain a type of sugar called *raffinose* that the body simply can't use. So, when you eat a lot of beans, you know the routine.

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The primary components of flatus are five odorless gases: nitrogen, hydrogen, carbon dioxide, methane, and oxygen. The unpleasant odor often associated with flatus is because of a small amount of sulfur-containing compounds, produced only by particular bacteria and not found in everyone.

The fragrance factor is also determined by the speed at which you eat. For some, inhaling a bowl of chili can create an atomic event. Others can eat flatulence-filled foods with no reaction at all. Each person's body reacts differently.

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History has provided several accounts of flatulence. Hippocrates himself professed, "Passing gas is necessary to well-being." In the mid-1800s the French entertainer Joseph Pujol ("*Le Petomane*," which translates into "The Fart Maniac".) was able to pass gas at will and at varying pitch. He actually played tunes for sold-out shows at the Moulin Rouge. (So much for playing "air guitar.")

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Excess gas isn't always a laughing matter. It can be a sign of a medical problem. If you are concerned about excess gas, you will want to talk about it with your health care provider. Flatulence can definitely cause social embarrassment. Even though it's a normal function, if you feel a toot coming on, be kind to others. Leave the room or use the bathroom. Thanks!

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Questions

1. What is the medical term used to describe the gas we pass?

2. How many times a day is considered "normal" for passing gas?

_____ 3. Which of these foods is known to create excess gas in some people?

- A. carrots
- B. beets
- C. pineapple
- D. beans

_____ 4. Which of these gases is present in flatus?

- A. neon
- B. carbon monoxide
- C. helium
- D. methane

_____ 5. What gas is to blame for the odor in flatus?

- A. sulfur
- B. neon
- C. helium
- D. oxygen

6. What did Hippocrates say about passing gas?
