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Here's Why Some People Get Extra Gassy on Planes

Advice for in-flight farters.



While I'm not an especially gassy person at sea level, once I get above the clouds anything can happen and reliably does. I get a distended belly and quickly succumb to the urge to unbutton my pants. If the discomfort continues and the chances of having a flirty conversation with my next-door neighbor are close to nil, I remove my headphones, bear down on the cushion and let out a tiny amount of gas. My hope is that the cushion will both muffle any sound and trap any odor. If I deem my stratospheric trouser-coughs to be inconspicuous enough, I repeat the procedure until I no longer look and feel as though I'm in my third trimester. Unless I'm kidding myself, I think I've largely gotten away with it.

Other flatulent flyers aren't quite so circumspect, however. In early **2018**, a plane flying from Dubai to Amsterdam had to make an emergency landing in Austria due to a passenger's refusal—after a stern telling off from the pilot, mind you—to cease and desist with the crop dusting. Now, if an unrepentant farter can down an airliner, I have to wonder why the traveling public isn't offered more advice on how to keep their in-flight flatus under control. I mean, the chances of any of us experiencing a water landing

are incredibly slim yet we all know that our our life jacket can be found under our seat and that we mustn't to inflate it until we exit the aircraft.

Until tips for how to mitigate one's methane are routinely included in the in-flight safety video or pantomimed by the flight crew, the onus is on us to figure out how to put a cork in it. But first, let's get an understanding of why we're prone to in-flight gas in the first place.

In-flight farts are largely a product of altitude and air pressure, says **Niket Sonpal**, New York City-based gastroenterologist and professor of clinical medicine at Touro College. "When there's less oxygen, gas expands and that includes the gas inside our body tissue," he adds. This is why people also experience finger and feet swelling at altitude. He goes on to explain that at around 6,000 to 8,000 feet airplane, cabins become pressurized. "Air expands at higher altitudes, the gas in our intestines expands too, up to 30 percent more than usual and that air needs to go somewhere," he says.

Interestingly, pain and distention caused by gas at altitude is likely to be more intense for women than for men. The reason, Sonpal says, is that women's intestines are more intertwined while men's are more horseshoe-shaped. Even under normal conditions, this intertwinedness means that women to take longer to digest food and experience more issues with digestion given what Sonal calls "their more intricate physicality." "When you add pressurized air to the mix, bellies bloat and get distended," he says. "Factor in that thin cabin air makes everyone dehydrated and for women especially, this means not enough water in the body to cater to ridding toxins."

While altitude is clearly triggering the incessant air biscuits, commonly made mistakes are exacerbating the situation. The first culprit, as at lower altitudes, is what we eat.

Eating heavier foods that are harder to digest 24 hours prior to the flight will result in more bloating and discomfort with gas. "Heavier foods such as red meats, pastas, and sweets just sit in your stomach leading up to your flight," he says. Sonal's recommendation is eat something like a salad with leafy greens and vegetables in the hours before you head out the door. Another pro tip: When on board, ask the flight attendant for hot water with lemon or, better yet, bring a few slices in a ziploc. High in alkaline, the hot lemon water can help the liver deal with toxins making everyone in a five foot radius despise you, Sonal says. A banana or some and pineapple are a great in-flight snacks that won't aggravate the your system further.

Something else I tend to do on planes is chew gum. It's not to relieve pressure-induced ear discomfort but contingency measure should a gorgeous rowmate want to strike up a close-quarters conversation with me. I'm not sure why I'm so fixated on this movie trope happening IRL. It has literally never happened to me ever and when it happens to other people the entire interaction can end up being **live tweeted**. I suppose is better than having the various notes of your farts being described in 280 characters.

Regardless, Sonpal thinks that by attempting to mitigate the embarrassment of having less-than-fresh breath by a phantom hottie, I'm unwittingly increasing the likelihood of something much, much worse happening. "When people chew gum they are swallowing more air which will lead to more gas, bloat, and flatulence aboard a flight," he says and I make a mental note to switch to Altoids. (Trump ruined **Tic-Tacs** for me.)

A third way that passengers are turning themselves into ticking time bombs is simply by sitting still. "Moving around stimulates circulation," Sonpal says. Sitting in a pressurized cabin for hours in the same position will reliably exacerbate stomach issues such as bloat and gas.

That leads us neatly on to what you can actually do about a gaseous build up if you haven't done anything preventative or it manifests despite your efforts. Sonpal prescribes getting up to walk around every 30 minutes or so. Unless you're on a fairly empty flight or are sitting in the aisle, this is going to inconvenience your rowmate(s) but less than you would if you subjected them to your dank toots from sea to shining sea.

Once you're up and out of your seat, you won't have many options for where to go, so head to the bathroom and let her rip. That's not just my personal recommendation but that of a **scientific paper** that looked at the problem of in-air flatulence. Jacob Rosenberg, professor of surgery at the University of Copenhagen and the study's lead author, wrote that letting it out will relieve a physical problem, but if you're unable to get out of your seat due to turbulence or a dozing neighbor, cause a social problem. His advice to the airline industry? Embedding seat covers, blankets, and even the gusset of special travel pants with charcoal to absorb the odor and stifle some of the embarrassment.

But charcoal may have another role to play in saving blushes above the clouds. A small study **published** in the *American Journal of Gastroenterology* states that activated charcoal prevents intestinal gas after eating a meal that would typically trigger gas. "Charcoal is a really powerful binder of toxins and it's often used to treat overdoses and prevents hangovers," Sonpal says, adding that taking around 500 mg the day before leading up to and during the flight may help you and your fellow flyers out of a stinky situation.

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