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Bloating or water retention? ^[1]

Alice,

Besides pre-menstrual hormonal changes, what causes bloating or water retention? Lately, I have experienced bloating in the stomach area, and I would like to know what I can do to prevent it or at least alleviate the discomfort and the occasional pain associated with it. I heard that a diet high in sodium may cause bloating.

Signed,

Feeling Discomfort

Answer

Dear Feeling Discomfort,

Whether you're experiencing abdominal bloating, excess gas, or the burping blues, there are many possible causes of your discomfort. Water retention, also known as edema, is an accumulation of extra fluid that's commonly caused by a temporary imbalance in your electrolyte ^[2] and fluid levels. While you're right that a diet high in sodium may lead to bloating, it's not the only cause. It could also be that eating certain foods or engaging in various behaviors are producing extra gas that may be contributing to how you're feeling. Read on for more information on the possible causes of bloating and remedies you can try at home!

People experiencing edema can feel it in any part of their body, but it often occurs in the arms, hands, legs, and feet. The extra fluid comes from leaking blood vessels and accumulates in the surrounding tissues, which may cause a feeling of swelling or bloating. Aside from premenstrual symptoms, mild edema may be caused by pregnancy or by remaining in one position (sitting or standing) too long. More serious causes include vein weakness or damage, kidney damage or disease, liver damage (cirrhosis), and congestive heart failure. In most cases, edema is a common reaction to stress on the body and goes away on its own.

Abdominal bloating (when the abdomen feels full and tight), on the other hand, is usually due to the buildup of gas in the stomach or intestines that's not released through flatulence or burping. Bloating due to gas is often accompanied by abdominal pain, ranging from mild or dull to sharp

and intense. This is a commonly encountered health issue — in fact, passing gas ten times a day is average, and up to 20 times a day is typical. To expand on this (no pun intended), here's a rundown on possible causes of your bloated belly:

- **Swallowing a surplus of air.** This happens when a person is nervous, chewing gum, drinking carbonated beverages, or drinking through a straw.
- **Consumption of certain foods,** including Brussels sprouts, turnips, cabbage, beans, lentils, and carbonated drinks with high levels of fructose or sorbitol.
- **Consuming excess sodium,** particularly in processed foods.
- **Lactose intolerance** leads to gas buildup from undigested lactose in the large intestine.
- **High fiber foods,** which aid in digestion, but may also produce a lot of gas.
- **Fatty foods,** which may prevent the stomach from emptying efficiently.
- **Smoking and consuming alcohol,** especially beer, have been shown to increase bloating.

Whether you're a gourmet chef or a microwave meal maven, diet has a lot to do with abdominal bloating. Certain foods (such as the ones listed above) may take longer to digest. This allows more time for bacterial fermentation in your colon and contributes to excess gas production. Foods that are partially broken down play a role in this phenomenon as well.

Depending on the cause of your bloating, there are some home remedies or over-the-counter medications that you may want to try:

- Reduce intake of foods that could cause the swallowing of excess air or produce gas.
- Eat food slowly.
- Increase your physical activity.
- Try medications such as lactase enzyme, activated charcoal, alpha-galactosidase, and bismuth subsalicylate.

While daily abdominal bloating may cause you some discomfort, the good news is that it's usually not worrisome. Still, it's recommended to consult with a health care provider if you're experiencing severe abdominal pain that interferes with your daily routine, blood in your stool, diarrhea, vomiting, weight loss, or severe heartburn. These may be signs of more serious conditions, such as celiac disease or irritable bowel syndrome. However, if you're just curious to know more about your case, they can also help answer any additional questions you may have and help you come up with a solution that best fits your lifestyle.

Hope these tips leave you feeling full of relief, not gas!

Alice!

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