

Fill 'er Up, But Hold The Gas

By Stern Dixon

To get to know someone well, claims my friend Irv, you need to play a round of golf with him. Obviously, Irv and his golfing buddies never shared a hearty helping of dehydrated chili, then bedded down inside a zipped-tight backpacking tent. When it comes to making or breaking a friendship, a sand trap doesn't hold a candle to sharing space with a gaseous tentmate.

Laugh if you will, but you know you've been on one end or the other, so to speak, of in-the field flatulence. The good news with a basic understanding of bowel mechanics, plus better food selection, you can avoid a nose-wrinkling night.

A GUT FEELING

Two types of uncomfortable inflation plague people- gas in the stomach and gas in the colon. The stomach variety, caused by swallowed air and excess acid, leads to another socially unacceptable act that some uncouth backpackers cherish: belching. Over-the-counter antacids like Turns can help this problem.

The more offensive variety of gas lurks deep within the colon. Bacteria feasting on undigested food cause fermentation-the same activity that puts the pop in a bottle of champagne-and an uncomfortable bubbling in your intestines. The amount of gas produced is proportional to the number and type of bacteria inhabiting your gut. According to Michael Levitt, Ph.D., an internationally recognized flares researcher with the Minneapolis Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, men are king when it comes to volume, but women produce more hydrogen sulfide-the byproducts of digested proteins and the stuff to be most concerned about when stuck inside a two-person tent.

Reducing the stench and volume of the vapors simply requires eating things your stomach and upper intestines can easily break down. While individuals' bodies react differently to the same foods, some foods definitely are more offensive than others. There are, however, common and persistent misconceptions about what foods are gas-producing.

Foods frequently blamed are those high in soluble fiber (oat bran, beans, peas, and most fruits), which do produce some gas, but the fiber helps food move through your system. More commonly, the culprits are the difficult-to-digest complex

sugars that feed the gas-producing bacteria in your gut. Unfortunately, these sugars are common in backpackable foods like beans, peas, cabbage, broccoli, onions, cauliflower, and whole-grain products, whether whole or processed, raw or cooked.

Add sugar-rich apples, grapes, and raisins to the list and it's no wonder back-packer's bloat is so common. Oh, and by the way- Dehydrating gaseous foods only concentrates the sugar in smaller packages, multiplying the offensive effect.

In addition, the complex sugar lactose, found in most creamy, cheesy sauces, can elevate your gas level, even if you aren't lactose intolerant (see www.backpacker.com/june01online for more about lactose intolerance).

As a side note, since intestinal gas is caused by bacteria working on lingering indigestibles, things that impede the progress of food through your system don't help. In other words, walking for hours with a hipbelt cinched tot around your gut won't make the situation any better, though it isn't a root cause of gas.

STOPPING THE HUMBLE

Experimenting with different trail foods will help you figure out which cause the most fumes. Many of us eat different foods on the trail than at home, so you can try "training" your colon to muscle through complex sugars more efficiently, just as you train your leg and back muscles to haul a heavy pack. Once you've identified the worst offenders, gradually introduce them into your home diet by adding them to several meals over the course of a week or 2. That should give your intestinal tract plenty of time to adapt, if it can. But if the foods still produce fumes at home, you can bet they will in the field, as well.

Another solution is smart swapping. Substitute dehydrated cherries or blueberries for the raisins in your trail mix. Instead of oatmeal with dehydrated apples and powdered milk, try cooked rice with honey and pecans .

Over-the-counter remedies available at grocery stores and pharmacies also help diminish the vapors. The food supplement Beano contains alpha-galactosidase, an enzyme that helps break down the complex carbohydrates in beans and certain other vegetables so they're easier to digest (see www.beano.net for a list of gas-producing foods that Beano neutralizes. The lactase enzyme in Lactaid tablets digests the sugar in dairy products.

As for folk remedies, such as soaking beans or adding ginger to potentially gassy meals, "There haven't been any scientific studies on this, says Raymond G. Hall Jr., Ph.D., physiologist at Loma Linda University School of Medicine in California. 'if soaking out the complex sugars were possible, I think it would take an extensive amount of soaking.'" In other words, more soaking than could be done in your water bottle overnight.

Other things you can do:

Cut back on the amount of red meat you eat, including jerky

Go ahead and chow down on the chili con carne, con beans, and con onions, but take along some Beano or activated char- coal tablets (such as CharcoCaps)

Pack plenty of spinach and kale, which are remarkably durable in all but the hottest weather. Dr. Levitt and others have found that eating chlorophyll, which makes green plants green, cuts down on odors.