

BLOATING BLUES

Most women suffer from stomach bloating, either during their monthly cycle, or depending on the food they eat. But for some, it becomes an almost daily occurrence, to the point where strangers can ask them whether they are pregnant. If bloating is blighting your life, **HELEN RAINE** takes a look at the changes you can make for a less troublesome tummy – and the signs that indicate it could be something more serious.

Many of us suffer from bloating occasionally, as part of our menstrual cycle, or when we eat something that doesn't agree with us; in fact, 30 per cent of the population report problems with a blown-up tummy.

But when the bloating becomes almost constant, or so extreme that strangers ask you when you are 'having the baby', it can seriously affect a woman's body image and confidence, making everything from buying clothes to going to the beach a challenge.

Bloating can also be symptomatic of a more serious problem. We take a look at how to deflate that belly balloon and when you need to seek medical advice.

QUICK FIXES

Slow Food

Bloating can be caused by eating too quickly. Our habit of scoffing food while under time pressure means that we don't chew properly and take in lots of air. Chewing is an important part of digestion – our saliva contains enzymes that start to break down the food before it gets to the stomach.

Eating mindfully [trying to pay attention to the flavour and texture of each mouthful] heightens the pleasure we get from food and means that we are less likely to overeat – another classic cause of bloating. You don't need to ruminate over the entire meal, but aim to make most of it count – some experts recommend chewing each mouthful 20 times.

Go Bananas with Ginger

Ginger is good for the stomach because of its natural anti-inflammatory properties – pour hot water on fresh slices of ginger to

make a tea [eat the ginger afterwards]. Peppermint, fennel, pineapple and probiotic yoghurts are similarly beneficial. Adding more potassium to your diet might also make a difference by reducing water retention; try foods like mangoes, quinoa, bananas and spinach.

Get Salt Savvy

Dr Mario Caruana, a registered dietitian and nutritionist says: "Salt is related to water retention, which could lead to a feeling of bloating. If no specific medical reason for the water retention is found, a low salt diet might help in reducing the symptoms." The World Health Organisation recommends adults should consume no more than 2.5g per person.

Go Fizz Free

Dr Caruana says fizzy or carbonated drinks can be an important cause of bloating, especially if taken in large quantities – they are full of bubbles that will end up as gas in your tummy.

Sayonara Sweeteners

When people are trying to lose weight, they often turn to artificial sweeteners, but these can cause bloating too. "One type of sweetener called a sugar alcohol/polyol, such as sorbitol mannitol, xylitol and maltitol found in sugar-free mints and chewing gum, can give rise to abdominal bloating," says Dr Caruana. Swap them for small amounts of agave syrup.

Excellent Exercise

Exercise helps to keep the digestive system working well, a key part of the bloating picture. In addition, a good workout, such as boot camp and swimming, will help to strengthen abdominal muscles to

deal with the bloat. If you've been a couch potato up to now, try going for a walk after eating – it is an excellent way to help digestion and get you some exercise.

Stomach Massage

Acupuncturists suggest that giving the stomach a gentle rub in a clockwise direction can help with bloating.

Unbung Yourself

Constipation is an obvious culprit for bloating. Try to keep your digestive system moving with a diet of whole grains, fruit and veggies.

Don't give up

Dr Caruana says a common problem is that clients are not consistent with their approach; "for example, they eat more slowly, or take ginger for a few days and then they give up. Dietary changes need to be done for a good few days and even weeks to see if the symptoms improve. Give your bowels time to adjust to any changes".

AND IF THAT DOESN'T WORK...

Understanding IBS

The most common cause of abdominal bloating is Irritable Bowel Syndrome [IBS], says Dr Caruana. IBS is a medical term used to describe a collection of gut symptoms in which bloating is the most common. He recommends medical screening for the condition.


If you are diagnosed with IBS, Dr Caruana says that a dietician can help to "determine not only what foods may be contributing to your distress, but also what nutritious food choices will help contribute to overall good health without aggravating gastrointestinal symptoms such as bloating".

Recently, robust research is directing us to a low FODMAP diet for IBS symptoms,

he continues. FODMAPs [Fermentable Oligo-Di-Monosaccharides and Polyols] are osmotic, meaning they pull water into the intestinal tract, may not be digested well and could be fermented by bacteria there.

Dr Caruana explains that the FODMAPs in the diet are fructose [such as fruits, honey, high fructose corn syrup], lactose [dairy], fructans [such as wheat, onion, garlic], galactans [such as beans, lentils, legumes] and polyols [sweeteners, stone fruits].

“Restricting these can help to reduce symptoms of bloating in relation to IBS”, he says.



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Allergic to Food

If you’ve tried most of the solutions above to no avail, you might be allergic to wheat, the lactose in dairy products, or some other food.

Dr Caruana explains that lactose [the sugar in milk] can “sometimes cause wind and bloating and IBS-type symptoms”. He suggests using lactose-free cow’s milk, yoghurts and ice cream instead of ordinary versions for two to four weeks.

“Using lactose-free products will help maintain your calcium intake. If it makes no difference, then return to using ordinary milk and dairy products.

“Cutting wheat may not be the answer; the fibre content in wheat or the quantity consumed needs to be assessed,” he adds.

Research shows that for many people, cutting out wheat and dairy has no discernible effect on bloating.

“If your symptoms persist after following general lifestyle and dietary advice, try to reintroduce the foods you have cut out. Monitor your progress by keeping a food and symptom diary,” Dr Caruana says.

He adds that self-diagnosis may be a mistake. “If a food allergy is suspected, it is important to discuss this with your doctor and be referred appropriately to a doctor specialising in food allergies and a registered dietitian.”

Dig the Enzymes

We all have digestive enzymes naturally, but sometimes, they stop working efficiently. Adding them back into the body can help break down indigestible sugars in beans and vegetables. The problem is that there are dozens of enzymes on the market, so finding the right one for you might be a case of trial and error. They are usually taken at the beginning of a meal.

Again, Dr Caruana recommends consulting with a professional before going down this road. “It is important to first see if the person is lactose intolerant. It is useless to recommend a digestive enzyme such as lactase [needed to break down

lactose] if the cause of the bloating is not coming from there,” he says.

Alternatively, papaya has natural digestive enzymes so include it in your diet if you can – the seeds are said to be particularly good and can be pureed into smoothies if you don’t like the bitter taste.

Hormonal Upheaval

In her *Menopause and Hormone Book*, author Dr Susan Love explains that bloating can be a symptom of menopause, due to big hormonal shifts, primarily fluctuating levels of oestrogen. Hormone replacement therapy may exacerbate this problem.

The website 34-menopause-symptoms.com adds that: “The duration and intensity [of bloating] will vary... with some women experiencing bloating for a few days and then not again for a year, or possibly for several months at a time. A woman can wake up with a flat stomach and then have her stomach distend progressively throughout the day, or the bloating may appear within a matter of minutes and be aggravated by eating.”

Oestrogen is probably the culprit. The site says it has an effect on the retention of water that occurs naturally as part of a woman’s menstrual cycle. “Women tend to retain more in the days leading up to menstruation as a result of rising oestrogen levels. When oestrogen levels become erratic during perimenopause, so does the incidence of water retention, leading to bloating.” Exercise, diet and alternative medicine can help.

WHEN TO SEEK FURTHER ADVICE

“I always advise clients to have a medical screening with their doctor or consultant first as bloating is a common symptom for many medical conditions such as celiac disease, gastrointestinal disorders, cancer and so on”, says Dr Caruana.

When medical conditions have been ruled out, he suggests an individualised approach by a registered dietitian to “thoroughly assess the situation and give appropriate dietary advice and direction”.

You should see a doctor right away if you are suffering from long-term stomach ache, chronic constipation, diarrhoea, nausea, or vomiting, rectal pain, or heartburn, weight loss, fever, or blood in the stools and urine, or any other symptoms that are causing you concern. ●