



FEATURE

# Flatulence

A fart by any other name ... would smell as bad!

By Dr Hans Andersen



Flatulence in pets can have a big impact on their owners, yet it is rarely discussed in veterinary literature.

Is it all a lot of hot air? Dr Hans Andersen gets to the bottom of things.

Our first 'baby', Albert, a wonderful curly coat retriever, slept in our bedroom. His terrible farts meant that we had to leave the door open to the patio all night. Fortunately the benign climate and thick down duvets meant we could do this on all but the coldest winter nights.

Flatulence in pets can have a big impact on their owners, yet it is rarely discussed in veterinary literature.

One exception is a New Zealand study which showed that nearly half the owners of the 110 clinically normal dogs surveyed had noticed flatulence. Only 14 thought it was a problem.

Indeed flatulence, though unpleasant, is normal – just one of those 'facts of life' we put up with.

### What makes a fart?

Surprisingly, more than 99 percent of the gas volume of a fart is made up of the odourless gases nitrogen, oxygen, hydrogen, carbon dioxide and methane. The nasty smell comes from traces of sulphur-containing gases like hydrogen sulphide, methanethiol and dimethyl sulphide.

These smelly substances are produced by bacterial fermentation of food in the large bowel. Though large amounts of gas are produced in this way, most of

the gas in the intestines comes from swallowed air.

### How much is too much?

There is huge variability in the amount and frequency of flatulence in humans – up to 1.5 litres divided amongst 20 farts is considered the upper end of the human normal range. Normal amounts have not been assessed in dogs and cats, but flatulence is more often reported as a problem in dogs than in cats.

This is likely to be because dogs often gulp their food, swallowing more air in the process. Short-nosed breeds of dog swallow more air when breathing,



especially when panting. Dogs are also more likely to scavenge rotten food, eat compost, or be fed sulphur-containing brassica vegetables like cabbage, broccoli and brussels sprouts.

Other foods often incriminated in increasing flatulence are soybeans and other legumes, both because of the sulphur content and the type of fibre. Poorer quality pet foods tend to rely on these as cheaper sources of protein. They are typically less digestible than meat and so undergo more fermentation in the colon, producing gas.

Carbohydrate sources other than rice may promote flatulence, and lactose (milk sugar) has also been incriminated, so avoiding milk products may also be helpful.

### Farts and gastro-intestinal disease

While increased flatulence can be a sign of poor pancreas (digestive gland) function or small intestinal disease in dogs, it is much more significant as a marker of bowel disease in cats. Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is common in cats (see *PAWS Issue 41*) and in one New Zealand study a quarter of the cats with the typical IBD signs of chronic diarrhoea and/or vomiting were flatulent. Because cats are so often private about toilet behaviour, flatulence can be a useful indicator of underlying IBD.

## What can I do to reduce my pet's farts?

If flatulence from your pet is proving a problem, here are some tips to try.

### 1. Reduce gas intake.

- Discourage gulping of food.
- Feed dogs separately to avoid competition.
- Feed several smaller amounts daily.
- Short-nosed breeds with noisy breathing often benefit from surgery to open their airways.

### 2. Reduce gas production

- Feed highly digestible foods (ask your veterinary team).
- Foods containing rice as the main carbohydrate are best.
- Avoid foods high in soymeal or other legumes.
- Avoid milk products.

### 3. Reduce gas smell - the sources of sulphur

- Avoid brassicas and onions (onions are dangerous to cats and dogs anyway).
- Reduce the protein in the diet and try changing the type of meat.
- Eliminate scavenging and access to compost.

### 4. Increase exercise

- This was associated with less flatulence being observed in the New Zealand study. This may be because the dogs were often downwind!

### 5. Medication – some drugs may help.

- Peptosyl (bismuth subsalicylate) strongly binds hydrogen sulphide, reducing the smell.
- Zinc acetate has been used to do the same.

### 6. Probiotics e.g acidophilus yoghurt.

This seemed to work for Albert but has made no difference to many.

### 7. Keep a fart chart – you can't manage what you don't measure!



## Skye's Fart Chart

In my 35 years of veterinary practice Steve and Fiona Halliday are the first clients to come up with the idea of creating a fart chart to manage their pet's flatulence.

As they trialled various diets they recorded the response each day in terms of the number and smelliness of the farts. They stayed consistently with one diet for several weeks before changing.

This approach meant that they eventually found the diet that controlled Skye's previously horrendous farts.