

ALL THE SMALL THINGS

Sometimes, seemingly innocuous ailments can point to something more sinister. Here's a closer look at 10 common conditions.

BY BANG WEI-TIN

SMELLY FARTS

It's normal to pass gas several times a day – but it should not stink. When it does, it's usually a sign of improper digestion. Whole grains, lactose-filled dairy products as well as sulphur-releasing foods like eggs and broccoli are especially hard to break down. As the food ferments in the intestines, odorous flatus (or farts) is produced, says Dr Gwee Kok Ann, consultant gastroenterologist with the Stomach Liver and Bowel Clinic. You're also more likely to pass foul-smelling gas if you're prone to constipation or diarrhoea. Both conditions point to abnormal movement (too slow or too fast) of the intestines, which results in longer fermentation time and poorer indigestion respectively, explains Dr Gwee.

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... It's accompanied by severe weight loss (more than five per cent of your original weight in a month). Stinky farts could point to malabsorption of nutrients and/or coeliac disease, a severe form of gluten intolerance, where the immune system responds by damaging the lining of the intestines, according to the US National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. Because the symptoms of coeliac disease are similar to a number of digestive tract conditions, it's best to see a gastroenterologist (a doctor who specialises in digestive tract disorders). A blood test or biopsy may be required to diagnose the condition.

PREVENT IT Peppermint oil pills reduce spasms in the digestive tract. It's also said to improve symptoms of Irritable Bowel Syndrome, a common disorder of the gastrointestinal tract. And, although studies aren't conclusive, drinking coffee and camomile tea can also help regulate the intestinal motion in those predisposed to constipation and diarrhoea respectively, says Dr Gwee.

COLD SORES

What's worse than having zits on a hot date? Sporting red and swollen sores on the lips and around the mouth! It's the result of an infection by a strain of the herpes simplex virus, which can stay dormant in the body for years before causing an outbreak of blisters. In some cases, the virus never becomes active. Scarily, even without visible symptoms, it can be highly contagious and spread from person to person through direct contact, warns Dr Chris Foo, consultant dermatologist at Raffles Skin & Aesthetics. Most cold sores clear up on their own within two weeks and rarely develop into anything more.

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... The blisters start to secrete pus. The open wounds are more contagious than usual and the virus can spread to other parts of the body. Red, itchy and painful sores can develop on the fingers, reports the UK National Health Services (NHS). See a doctor immediately.

FIX IT There are over-the-counter (OTC) creams that help speed up the healing process. "Those with alcohol and lemon extract are popular as they shorten healing time and prevent recurrence," says Portia Phua, a pharmacist at Watsons. In the meantime, practise good hygiene, wear a mask and use a cold sore patch to prevent the virus from spreading to others or elsewhere on your body.

SORE THROAT

That burning, scratchy sensation at the back of your throat has many causes, but the most common is viral infection (usually by flu viruses). Other causes include bacterial and yeast infections, smoking, overuse of the throat and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), which causes stomach acid to back up into the food pipe and irritate the throat.

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... It persists for more than five days and is accompanied by a fever that lasts more than three days. This could point to an infection that has spread to the sinus, middle ear or chest. In severe strep throat (a bacterial infection in the throat and the tonsils), kidney disease and inflammation of the heart muscle may develop. Telling signs include swelling in the neck, blood in the phlegm and difficulty swallowing, says Dr David Lau, consultant ear, nose and throat surgeon at Raffles ENT Centre.

FIX IT Most throat sprays, gargles and lozenges contain antiseptic and anaesthetic ingredients to kill germs and numb the area. Just be careful not to exceed the recommended dose for medicated lozenges. Also avoid taking them continuously for more than a week. "Certain chemical compounds in lozenges can stimulate the nervous system excessively, causing restlessness, disorientation and aggravate abnormal heart rhythms," warns Dr Lau. ▶

BRUISES

A slight bump or fall can cause the small blood vessels under the skin to leak blood to the surface without actually breaking the skin. These ugly bluish purple patches usually last for about two weeks before fading away, according to the US National Institutes of Health. They also tend to occur more frequently in some people than others. Dr Baladas Haridas Ganesan, a consultant general surgeon at Raffles Surgery Centre explains: "Those who bruise easily often have blood vessels that are naturally more fragile. People taking blood thinning medication like steroids and warfarin might also be more prone to bruising."

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... Sudden, unexplained bruising occurs without prior accidents or injuries. "This should be investigated by a physician as it may be a sign of leukaemia (a cancer of the blood)," says Dr Foo.

FIX IT Rubbing gently may help to encourage circulation and reduce swelling, but do this only when the spot no longer hurts. And if you bruise easily, steer clear of fish oil and ginkgo supplements. These have blood-thinning properties that could worsen the problem.

BLISTERS

While it may be tempting to burst those little "bubbles", it's best to leave them alone. Blisters may form when the outer layer of skin has been damaged by abrasion or when skin comes into contact with chemicals and heat. They also accompany medical conditions like chicken pox. The former is especially common among women – thanks to our unending love affair with ill-fitting shoes.

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... The fluid inside the blister turns yellow and when the blister starts to weep, cause pain or recur. These are signs of an infection, reports the NHS. Those that are caused by an allergic reaction, burn or scald also require medical attention.

PREVENT IT Wearing a new pair of kicks? Apply a thin layer of balm containing an emollient like allantoin to prevent chafing of the feet. If the blister has already formed, protect it with a gel plaster. In addition, it's better to leave the unbroken skin over the blister intact as it provides a natural barrier to bacteria and reduces the risk of infection, advises Dr Foo.

WARTS

These icky-looking cauliflower-like growths are actually caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), a highly contagious virus that spreads via skin-to-skin contact. After entering the body through a cut, abrasion or small tear in the outermost layer of skin, it could lie dormant for months before triggering an eruption of unsightly skin bumps on the body, including the hands, soles, genitals and even under the fingernails. This makes it hard to pinpoint when, where and how the virus was contracted, says Portia.

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... It's found "down under". Genital warts, a sexually transmitted infection, can lead to problems during pregnancy. Besides making urination difficult, those found on the vaginal wall (birth canal) could also make the vagina less stretchable during childbirth. This in turn affects the ease of delivery, according to the Health Promotion Board of Singapore (HPB). See a gynaecologist at once.

FIX IT Treatments vary according to the site of infection. For instance, those found on the hands and feet can be self-treated with OTC wart removers that use a freezing technology (yes, you read right!) that kills the virus and sloughs off infected skin, while others require prescribed treatments, says Portia.

SORE EYES

Also known as pink eye, conjunctivitis is the inflammation of the transparent membrane covering the eye and inner surface of the eyelid. It's usually brought on by an allergy, dryness or an infection, reports the HPB. Viral conjunctivitis is typically associated with a watery discharge while bacterial infections bring on a thicker yellow-green secretion.

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... Symptoms like redness and swelling worsen or remain the same. "Viral conjunctivitis can get so severe that a membrane starts to form on the inner lining of the eyelids. This thin layer of a mucus-like sheen can rub against – and cause abrasion of – the cornea, and affect vision," says Dr Lee Sao Bing, medical director at Shinagawa Visioncare.

FIX IT Stop wearing contact lenses and see a GP. You'll need prescription eye drops as OTC lubricating drops usually only counter dry peepers. More importantly, avoid those that claim to "whiten" the whites of the eyeball. "These work by constricting blood vessels. Redness will set in as soon as you stop using them," warns Dr Lee.

CHRONIC DRY COUGH

You might think that dry coughs that do not churn phlegm are less contagious than wet, chesty ones because they're, well, dry. Wrong! "Even though there's no phlegm, you're still coughing microscopic water droplets that carry highly contagious viruses and bacteria into the air," explains Dr Lau. Asthma, airway sensitivity, GERD, pollution, and smoking are just some possible causes of a dry cough that persists for months.

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... There's excessive sputum, blood in phlegm, persistent fever, perspiration and breathlessness. These are red flags that point to underlying lung or sinus infections as well as potentially deadly conditions like tuberculosis and lung tumour.

FIX IT Forget OTC medications that do little more than suppress the cough. See a doctor who can determine the underlying cause and recommend the right corresponding treatment.

INSECT BITES

They might be small, but insects can cause great discomfort with a single bite or sting. In general, non-venomous bites (such as those from mozzies and bed bugs) tend to give rise to itching. Poisonous stings from bees and wasps, on the other hand, can lead to redness, swelling and intense pain, according to the National Skin Centre of Singapore.

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... Anaphylaxis – a life-threatening allergic reaction to insect venom – develops. Symptoms include nausea, facial swelling, breathing difficulties and abdominal pain. Dengue fever, which is spread via mosquitoes, is also currently on the rise, with more than 8,000 cases reported so far this year, according to the National Environment Agency of Singapore.

FIX IT From pain-easing paracetamol and allergy-relieving antihistamines to topical creams containing itch-soothing calamine, there is a slew of OTC products that can alleviate the discomfort. If you have symptoms of anaphylaxis, seek medical attention immediately.

HICCUPS

Hiccups or spasms of the diaphragm (the muscle at the base of the lung) can be pretty irritating. But they're perfectly normal and tend to stop after a few minutes. Hiccups can happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime – especially at the start of the menstrual cycle. Although the exact link is unknown, it's said that bloating, a common premenstrual symptom, could affect the diaphragm, which in turn leads to hiccups, says Dr Lau. Another theory: These spasms may be triggered by emotional anxiety, which can escalate during that time of the month.

IT'S SERIOUS WHEN... It persists for days. They usually point to more fatal medical conditions such as a brain injury from stroke, lung tumour, diabetes and kidney failure.

FIX IT While there are no proven methods to stop these unwanted contractions, popular home remedies could help. And they're not just old wives' tales – some common hiccup busters such as holding one's breath and squeezing the wrist or the muscle between the thumb and index finger may actually have a scientific basis. Says Dr Lau: "The former is said to create a build-up of carbon dioxide in the lung, which in turn immobilises and relaxes the diaphragm, while the latter works by providing a distraction so that the nervous rhythm of the diaphragm can restore itself." **E**

YOUR GO-TO KIT
STOCK THESE HANDY ITEMS FOR MINOR AILMENTS, SUGGESTS PORTIA PHUA, A PHARMACIST AT WATSON'S.

SURGICAL MASK This keeps airborne diseases such as flu viruses at bay.

SCISSORS Keep a pair on hand to remove clothing and/or cut gauze or bandages in an emergency.

TWEEZERS These are good for removing splinters and insect stings.

ANTISEPTIC WIPES Clean open wounds and slash the risk of infection.

ANTISEPTIC OINTMENT Pick a topical cream or spray containing povidone iodine or chlorhexidine to reduce infection, as well as an anaesthetic to lessen minor pain.

PAINKILLERS Paracetamol is commonly used to combat pain and fever while anti-inflammatory meds such as ibuprofen can be used to relieve sprains and strains.