

laxative misuse

Many people with eating disorders misuse laxatives. Some people use over 50 per day...but even if it's just 2 or 3, any quantity of laxatives used regularly because of weight/shape concerns is laxative misuse, because these drugs have harmful side-effects. Laxatives are even less effective than vomiting as a method for weight control. (See our handout *Vomiting and Your Health*)

Types of Laxatives

Laxative products work through different mechanisms. Some, especially those which contains senna, act as irritants to the lower gastro-intestinal (GI) tract, reducing the absorption of liquid. Others attract water so that the volume in the gut increases and the bowel swells. Others lubricate the GI tract and prevent water and vitamins being absorbed. They can be sold in pill form, in chocolate, or in herbal teas.

Dangers of Laxative Misuse

Laxatives disrupt normal bowel function

Symptoms include: loss of intestinal muscle tone, bloating, gas, colicky pain, appearance of mucus and blood in the stool, incontinence of faeces. In most people, these symptoms are reversible after stopping laxatives, but some permanent effects may occur.

Laxatives can cause electrolyte imbalance

Electrolytes are substances that regulate the transmission of nerve impulses, and a proper balance among the different electrolytes is crucial to many body functions. Too much potassium can be lost, which causes muscle weakness, numbness, paralysis, seizures and irregular heartbeat.

These effects can be fatal, with few warning signs, even in people who do not appear to be sick.

Myths About Laxatives

Myth 1: Large doses of laxatives will help me lose weight
People believe that laxatives prevent the absorption of food, thus preventing weight gain. They weigh themselves immediately after a bowel movement and see that the scale has gone down, and assume this is real weight loss...

Fact: Weight loss seen after using laxatives is due to fluid loss, and will be reversed after drinking fluids. Laxatives have a minimal effect on absorption of calories, thus hardly any effect on true weight loss. They work on the lower part of the bowel after absorption has happened higher up the GI tract.



Myth 2: I need laxatives for my constipation

Constipation is common in dieters and people with eating disorders. Prolonged constipation is uncomfortable physically and also psychologically – it can be upsetting to have a swollen abdomen and/or to weigh more (temporarily) because of retained waste.



Fact: Constipation in people with eating disorders occurs because there isn't enough food to move through the gut. The solution is increased and/or regular food intake, particularly of high-fibre foods, and increased fluid intake. Laxatives can make the problem worse, because after laxative use, the intestines have emptied and it's not possible for a normal bowel movement to occur for some days...so you get into a vicious cycle. Laxative abuse can also cause loss of intestinal muscle tone, so the bowels become dependent on these drugs.

Myth 3: I need laxatives to relieve my bloated feeling

People with eating disorders often feel full/bloated, with abdominal pain or swelling and wind. This is not only physically uncomfortable but psychologically distressing, as the symptoms can cause the abdomen to seem larger.

Fact: There is some basis for these physical symptoms - many people with eating disorders experience delayed gastric emptying (slowness of the stomach in passing food into the small intestine). This is caused by not eating enough. And laxatives actually increase swelling, pain and gas formation. The symptoms gradually disappear as eating returns to normal.

How to Stop Laxative Abuse

- Laxatives can be stopped abruptly. You may experience constipation and it will take some time for normal bowel function to return, but with adequate food intake, it should not take long. Your GP may prescribe bulk-forming or stool-softening products on a temporary basis.
- You don't need alternative methods of regulating bowel function – such as herbal products that regulate bowel function (these are also laxatives) or enemas.
- You may have temporary weight gain during laxative withdrawal. Don't panic – it is only temporary water retention, while your body overcompensates for the dehydration caused by laxatives. And remember that laxatives weren't helping you to control your weight - it just seemed like it. Don't start another vicious cycle by turning to food restriction or vomiting.