

Laxative Misuse

What is a Laxative?

Laxatives are medications used on a short-term basis to relieve constipation. There are several different types, which have different roles depending on the cause of the constipation. Some laxatives are available over the counter from pharmacies, whilst others are available by prescription. Laxatives can take many forms, including pills, in chocolate, or in herbal teas.

Eating Disorders and Laxative Misuse

Many people with eating disorders misuse laxatives. This is often due to the strongly held (but false) belief that laxatives help with weight loss/prevent weight gain by preventing the absorption of food.

In reality, any weight loss and change in body shape observed from laxative misuse is actually due to fluid loss from diarrhoea and the complete emptying of the large intestine. Laxatives have minimal effect on calorie absorption because they work on the lower part of the bowel, whereas food is digested and absorbed higher up the gastro-intestinal (GI) tract in the small intestine.

Many people with eating disorders also believe that laxatives are needed to relieve constipation and feeling bloated. Prolonged constipation and bloating is common in people with eating disorders and occurs because there isn't enough food to move through the gut. Consequently, people with eating disorders often experience delayed gastric emptying (slowness of the stomach in passing food along the intestine).

Laxatives can actually make the problem of constipation and bloating worse because after use, the intestines have emptied and it may not be possible for a normal bowel movement to occur for some days, causing people to get into a vicious cycle of laxative misuse. Additionally, laxatives can increase swelling, pain and gas formation in the stomach, which contributes to feeling bloated.

Consequently, laxative misuse has hardly any effect on true weight loss or ongoing relief of constipation or bloating. Regular misuse of laxatives (regardless of quantity) can however have harmful side-effects on a person's health.



Dangers of Laxative Misuse

Laxatives disrupt normal bowel function

Symptoms include bloating, gas, colicky pain, appearance of mucus and blood in the stool, and incontinence of faeces. In most people, these symptoms

are reversible after stopping laxatives, but some permanent effects may occur.

****WARNING: If you are taking senna-based laxatives, it is recommended that you immediately change to a non-senna product.**

Laxatives containing senna act as serious irritants to the lower GI tract and have been known to cause sudden loss of intestinal muscle tone causing the bowel to become dependent on these drugs or worse, complete paralysis of the large intestine, which will then need to be removed surgically. Serious damage can be caused without any warning signs.

Laxatives can cause electrolyte imbalance

Laxative misuse leads to large losses of body salts and water, which are vital in regulating electrical/nerve impulses in muscle, especially the heart. Electrolyte imbalance can cause muscle weakness, numbness, paralysis, seizures, irregular heartbeat, and even cardiac arrest.

Additional risks of laxative misuse include kidney failure/problems with kidney function through dehydration, rectal bleeding and urinary tract infections.

Stopping Laxative Use: What to Expect

Depending on the advice of your GP, laxatives can be stopped abruptly, or tapered down. Upon withdrawal, short-term symptoms of constipation and bloating may persist, as it takes time for normal bowel function to return.

The best way to reduce symptoms of constipation and bloating is to normalise your eating (see our handout, *Regular Eating for Recovery*). To help your body return to normal bowel function, make sure you eat a range of foods that contain dietary fibre, such as wholemeal bread, high-fibre breakfast cereals, brown rice, beans, fruit and vegetables, and drink plenty of fluids (1.5-2L water daily).

During laxative withdrawal you may notice temporary weight gain, bloating or swelling of the feet and ankles. Don't panic - this is only temporary water retention whilst your body overcompensates for the dehydration caused by laxatives. Remember, laxatives are not an effective means of weight control!

Giving up laxatives can be very anxiety provoking. If you need further guidance, we recommend consulting with a professional who has experience working with eating disorders.

