

Eating disorders and laxatives

People who misuse laxatives often find themselves in a no-win situation. They use laxatives to “feel thin” which is an immediate positive result. Eventually, however, the exact opposite occurs. They find themselves “feeling fat” from excessive water retention – a delayed, negative result.

Here are some steps to stop misusing laxatives:

1. Many laxatives can be stopped abruptly. Check with your GP if you are concerned.
2. Drink at least 6-10 cups of water and decaffeinated beverages daily – not caffeinated drinks because they act like a diuretic and promote loss of fluid. Restricting fluid intake at this time promotes dehydration and only worsens constipation.
3. Include some physical activity in your regular daily pattern, but discuss the type and intensity of the activity with your therapist or doctor first. Too much, or too vigorous exercise can worsen constipation due to effects on your metabolism and fluid balance.
4. Eat regularly. It is important that you spread the amount of food recommended to you on your meal plan across at least 3 meals a day and eat at regular intervals.
5. Eat more foods that promote natural bowel movements. The healthiest dietary approach to promoting normal bowel function is to eat more whole grain breads, cereals, and crackers and wheat bran or foods with wheat bran added. This dietary approach should be done in tandem with drinking more fluids. Vegetables and fruits also contribute to normal bowel function. Prunes and prune juice are not recommended because the ingredient in prunes that promotes bowel movements is actually an irritant laxative.
6. Write down the frequency of your bowel movements on a sheet of paper. If you are constipated for more than 3 days call your doctor, dietitian or therapist.

What to expect from laxative withdrawal

There is no way to predict exactly how stopping laxatives will affect you. For example, the amount or length of time laxatives have been used is not an indicator of how severe the withdrawal symptoms will be.

Common side effects of laxative withdrawal are:

- Constipation
- Fluid retention
- Feeling bloated
- Temporary weight gain

Just reading this list, you can see that laxative withdrawal is especially difficult for people with eating disorders. If you are already highly reactive to “feeling fat” then the symptoms of laxative withdrawal only worsen this feeling. To help you get through the process of laxative withdrawal, it is essential to remember that any weight gain associated with laxative withdrawal is only temporary.

How long laxative withdrawal lasts can vary greatly.

A few people have these symptoms for a couple of days; others have them for two to three months. Most people have symptoms of laxative misuse for one to three weeks after stopping laxatives.

The medical complications of laxative misuse depend on several factors, including the type of laxatives used, the amount used, and how long they have been used. Some of the more common complications of laxative misuse include constipation, dehydration, bleeding and impaired bowel functions.

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Laxative Misuse: Myths and Facts

Myth: If you induce diarrhoea with laxatives you can prevent the absorption of foods and avoid body weight gain.

Fact: Inducing diarrhoea by laxatives does not significantly change the absorption of food in the body. Consequently laxatives do not significantly prevent weight gain. What appears to be weight loss is actually dehydration or water deprivation. Laxatives work near the end of the bowel where they primarily affect absorption of water and electrolytes (like sodium and potassium). They thus work after most of the nutrients from food have been absorbed into the body.

Myth: You need to use a laxative every time you feel constipated.

Fact: "Feeling" constipated does not necessarily mean that you are constipated. This is especially true of people who have problems with eating. Eating too little food or eating sporadically can result in the sensation of constipation. In this case the problem is not constipation but poor eating habits.

People who use excessive amounts of laxatives will eventually find the exact opposite happening – the laxatives will cause reflex constipation.

Myth: All laxatives are alike

Fact: There are many different types of laxatives that are taken by mouth or as a suppository. The ones most commonly used are:

- Stimulant type laxatives including Senokot, Nulax and some of the so-called herbal laxatives
- Osmotic type laxatives including Milk of Magnesia
- Bulk Agents including Metamucil and unprocessed bran. Bulk agents promote bowel movements. When bulk agents are used as directed (with large amounts of water), they don't have the same physical effects on the bowel as the stimulant-type and osmotic laxatives. However when these bulk agents are misused they have the same psychological consequences as laxatives. Misusing these agents should be discontinued.

Myth: Laxatives, particularly over-the-counter products, are safe.

Fact: Laxative misuse can be medically dangerous. Laxative misuse is defined as use of laxatives for weight control or frequent use of laxatives over an extended period of time.

