



Laxative Abuse

PATIENT EDUCATION SERIES

People sometimes use laxatives believing that they can avoid weight gain by inducing diarrhea and preventing the absorption of food. However, this does not work. Laxatives operate near the end of the bowel, after most of the nutrients from the food have already been absorbed into the body. They primarily affect the absorption of water and electrolytes (e.g., sodium, potassium) – not calories or fat. Thus, laxatives are not effective as a weight loss or weight control method. Moreover, the severe electrolyte imbalance they cause, may necessitate emergency medical treatment.

Someone who regularly uses laxatives may start to feel constipated. A “feeling” of constipation can be misleading, since eating too little food or eating sporadically can create a sensation of constipation. The problem is poor eating habits, not constipation. Also, excessive use of laxatives gradually causes “reflex constipation,” as the bowel loses its ability to perform its natural function.

Medical complications

Some of the common complications of laxative abuse are the following:

1. Dehydration: Laxatives cause loss of fluid through the intestines.
2. Electrolyte imbalance: With chronic diarrhea, electrolytes (i.e., potassium, sodium and chloride) are drawn out of the body. Proper electrolyte levels are necessary to the function of the heart, muscles and nerves. Severe electrolyte imbalance can cause irregular heart beat, and even heart failure (cardiac arrest).
3. Water retention (bloating or edema): Laxatives cause loss of fluid; the body responds by retaining fluid to try to protect itself against dehydration.
4. Bleeding: Development of blood in the stool, and the subsequent potential anemia, can result from laxative abuse.
5. Constipation: As noted above, the repeated use of excessive amounts of laxatives actually creates “reflex constipation,” which may lead a person to increase the use of laxatives, which, in turn, only makes the constipation worse. Permanent impairment of the bowel function also can result from excessive use of laxatives.

Guidelines for stopping laxative abuse

1. Try to stop using laxatives immediately. Remember that they don't result in the outcome you wish to achieve, and they do very unhealthy things to your body.
2. Drink at least 6–10 cups of water a day. Cut down on (or avoid) caffeinated beverages since they have a diuretic effect on the body, meaning they remove water instead of replenishing it.
3. Eat at regular intervals throughout the day. Eat at least 3 meals at regular intervals; you may eat more frequent, smaller meals (e.g., 6 a day) if it is more comfortable. Unprocessed vegetables, salads, bran and whole grains will help to stimulate your intestines naturally. Raw fruit, stewed prunes or prune juice can help to loosen the stool.
4. If you are constipated for more than three days, consult your medical provider.

Laxative withdrawal

Common symptoms associated with laxative withdrawal may last 1 to 3 weeks, but eventually dissipate. Many people experience temporary constipation, fluid retention, feeling bloated and temporary weight gain (due to fluid retention). Since one of the effects associated with stopping laxatives is temporary weight gain, it may be extremely stressful to stay off laxatives. To help you go through the process of withdrawal, it is very important to remember that any weight gain is temporary, and symptoms will go away once your body re-regulates itself.

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