



The Emily Program

The eating disorder specialists

Laxative Abuse

Laxative abuse can be medically dangerous. Laxative abuse is defined as (1) use of laxative for weight control, or (2) frequent use of laxatives over an extended period of time. Here are some steps to stop abusing laxatives:

1. Stop taking laxatives right now. Do not take any more unless your physician instructs you to. Stimulant laxatives are especially harmful to the body.
2. Drink 6 to 10 cups of water or caffeine-free beverages. Fluid intake is important to prevent constipation.
3. Include some physical activity in your day, as this can help regulate bowel function. Check with your physician before beginning any exercise regimen.
4. Eat regularly. It is important you have at least 3 meals per days, and to eat at regular intervals.
5. Eat more foods that promote normal bowel movements. Eat more whole-grain breads and cereals, and fruits and vegetables. Increase your fluid intake. Avoid prunes and prune juice as they contain an irritant laxative, and long-term use of prunes can result in the same problems as long term use of laxatives.
6. Write down frequency of bowel movements. If you are constipated for more than 3 days, call your physician, dietician or psychotherapist.
7. Common side effects of laxative withdrawal: constipation, fluid retention, feeling bloated, temporary weight gain. Most of these symptoms will go away within a few days or weeks after stopping laxatives. Your doctor can also help by giving you medications to help ease these side effects while stopping laxatives.

Laxative Abuse: Frequently Asked Questions

If you induce diarrhea with laxatives, you can prevent absorption of food and avoid weight gain?

Inducing diarrhea with laxatives does not significantly change the absorption of food. Laxatives do not prevent weight gain. What appears to be weight loss is actually dehydration. Laxatives work near the end of the bowel, where the primary work of water and electrolytes take place, not food absorption.

Do you need to use a laxative every time you feel constipated? Feeling constipated doesn't mean that you are. Eating too little food or sporadic eating patterns can also create a sensation of constipation.

Do you need to use a laxative every time you are constipated? People who use excessive amounts of laxatives will eventually find the opposite happens. The laxatives will cause constipation or fullness.

Are all laxatives are the same? Since many are available over-the-counter, are they all safe? There are many different kinds. Misuse of any kind of laxative is potentially dangerous. The most common types of laxatives are:

- stimulant-type, such as Ex-lax, Correctol, Senokot, Dulcolax, Milk of Magnesia
- bulk agents such as Metamucil, Colace, unprocessed bran



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Medical Complications of Laxative Abuse

Medical complications of laxatives are dependent on many factors, such as the type and amount of laxative used, and for how long. Some of the more common complications of laxative abuse are:

- Constipation: abuse of laxatives leads to constipation. This may lead people to increase the amount of laxative they use, which worsens the problem
- Dehydration: fluid loss impairs the body's ability to function
- Electrolyte Imbalances: Electrolytes such as potassium, sodium, and chloride are extremely important to body function, and electrolyte imbalances can result in severe cardiac and organ function consequences
- Edema: laxatives cause fluid loss. Drastic changes in fluid balance confuse the body's self-regulating protective defenses, which can lead to fluid retention and edema.
- Bleeding: people who abuse laxatives, especially stimulant types, can develop blood in their stools. Chronic blood loss can lead to anemia.
- Impaired Bowel Function: abuse of stimulant type laxatives can lead to permanent impairment of bowel function, possibly even surgery to remove damaged sections of the bowel.

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