

Assessing Laxative Abuse in Eating Disorders

Objective

To help you understand the symptoms and consequences of the overuse of laxatives.

You Should Know

Laxatives are medications that are used to relieve constipation. Laxatives can take various forms, including pills, 'chocolate' squares, or herbal teas. People with eating disorders sometimes misuse laxatives because they think that taking laxatives will help with weight loss or prevent weight gain. However, laxatives minimally affect calorie absorption and any change in body weight is caused by fluid loss.

Some people with eating disorders think that laxatives are needed to relieve constipation and belly bloat. However, constipation and bloating are common in people with eating disorders because there isn't enough food to move through the gut. Laxatives can actually make the problem worse because normal bowel movements might be delayed for several days following laxative use. Laxatives can also cause swelling, pain, and gas formation in the stomach (leading to a bloated appearance).

The best way to reduce constipation and bloating is to stop using laxatives and normalize your eating. If you decide to stop using laxatives, you can't really predict exactly how your body will respond. The best way to lessen unpleasant effects of laxative withdrawal is to prepare yourself and develop a plan. Understand that common side effects of laxative withdrawal are constipation, fluid retention in the feet or ankles, temporary weight gain, and feeling bloated. Your symptoms can last a few days or up to 2-3 months. *Remember that weight gain associated with laxative withdrawal is temporary.*

To help your body return to normal bowel function, eat a range of foods that contain dietary fiber including raw fruits and vegetables and drink plenty of fluid, at least 8-10 cups of non-caffeinated fluids daily. Exercise is also important, because regular physical activity increases your metabolism and gets your bowels moving.

You should always consult a medical doctor if you are experiencing problems with your bowels. You can take the worksheet on the following page to your physician to help him or her identify your problems.

Assessing the Effects of Laxative Overuse

Directions: Please rate yourself on the following statements related to the overuse of laxatives. Use the scale: 1=This doesn't apply to me at all to 10=This always applies to me.

___ My bowel movements are infrequent (once every 2-3 days or less).

___ My bowel movements are painful.

___ I feel unsteady, lightheaded, or experience involuntary shaking.

___ I have frequent abdominal cramping.

___ I "feel" constipated even if I have daily bowel movements.

___ I have diarrhea more than 3-4 times/week.

___ I feel nauseous or have an upset stomach almost every day.

___ I am bloated and/or have a distended stomach.

___ My vision is blurry.

___ My hands and/or feet or ankles feel swollen.

___ I see blood in my stool.

Think About It

Who have you talked to about your laxative use? Is there someone who could be helpful and understanding?

Is there anything preventing you from eating a more normal diet?

What are your fears about stopping laxative use?

What can you do to promote normal bowel movements?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(**1** = not very helpful, **5** = moderately helpful, **10** = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
