

Laxative Misuse

What is a Laxative?

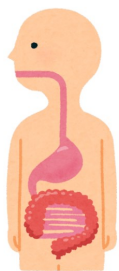
Laxatives are medications designed for short-term use to relieve constipation. There are several different types, which have different roles depending on the cause of the constipation.

Challenging Myths About Laxative Misuse

Many people hold misunderstandings about what laxatives do, and these myths can contribute to their misuse.

Myth 1: “Laxatives help with weight loss”.

FACT: Laxatives do **not** prevent the body from absorbing food. Food is digested and absorbed in the small intestine, while laxatives act on the large intestine, after absorption of food has already occurred. Any weight loss and change in body shape observed from laxative misuse is actually due to **temporary** fluid loss from diarrhoea and the emptying of the large intestine.

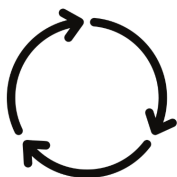


Myth 2: “I need laxatives because I’m bloated or constipated.”

FACT: Bloating and constipation are common in people with eating disorders because there is not enough regular food intake to keep digestion moving normally. This can lead to delayed gastric emptying (slowness of the stomach in passing food along the intestine). Long-term laxative misuse can **worsen** constipation and bloating. After the bowel is emptied, it takes days before a normal bowel movement can occur, creating a vicious cycle of reliance on laxatives over time. Laxatives can also increase pain, swelling, and gas formation which can make bloating feel more intense rather than relieving it.

Myth 3: “Using laxatives help me feel in control or relieved”.

FACT: Using laxatives may provide short-term relief from anxiety or distress. However, over time they lead to dependence and reduced confidence in your ability to cope without them. Laxatives provide a false sense of control and maintain anxiety in the long-term as the underlying reasons for their use remain unaddressed.



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 irritants to the lower gastrointestinal 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.

Health Risks of Laxative Misuse

Regular misuse of laxatives (regardless of quantity) can have harmful side-effects. It is important to be aware of health risks associated with laxative misuse. Some of these include:

- Disruption of normal bowel functioning. This can result in bloating, gas, colicky pain, appearance of mucus and blood in the stool, and incontinence of faeces.
- Electrolyte imbalances. 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 imbalances can cause muscle weakness, numbness, paralysis, seizures, irregular heartbeat, and even cardiac arrest.
- Chronic constipation and colon damage due to nerve and muscle weakening (known as “lazy bowel”)
- Rectal and intestinal damage from frequent bowel movements or straining
- Kidney or liver problems (including dehydration-related kidney failure), rectal bleeding, and urinary tract infections.

For most people, these symptoms are reversible after reducing or stopping laxatives. In some cases, longer-term effects may occur which is why it is important to discuss this with your general practitioner (GP), who can provide more specific information tailored to you.

Stopping Laxative Use: What to Expect

Your GP may recommend stopping laxatives either gradually or all at once, depending on your individual situation.

- When laxatives are reduced or stopped, the bowel may need time to adjust. It is common and normal to experience temporary bloating, constipation, changes in stool consistency, and a sense of fullness or discomfort. These symptoms usually improve as the bowel begins to return to its natural rhythm.
- One of the most effective ways to reduce your constipation and bloating is to return to regular and adequate eating (see our handout, [Regular Eating for Recovery](#)). Eating consistently supports your digestion and helps stimulate normal bowel moments.
- Aim to 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 (around 1.5 to 2L of water daily).
- During laxative withdrawal you may also notice temporary weight changes. This is due to water retention whilst your body restores its natural fluid balance after periods of dehydration caused by laxative misuse.



Stopping laxative misuse can feel difficult and may cause anxiety or distress. If you need further guidance or support, we recommend discussing with a professional who has experience working with eating disorders.