

What is laxative abuse?

Laxative abuse occurs when a person attempts to get rid of unwanted calories, lose weight, “feel thin,” or “feel empty” through the repeated, frequent use of laxatives. Often, laxatives are misused following eating binges, when the individual mistakenly believes that the laxatives will work to rush food and calories through the gut and bowels before they can be absorbed. But that doesn’t really happen. Unfortunately, laxative abuse is serious and dangerous – often resulting in a variety of health complications and sometimes causing life-threatening conditions.

What is the laxative myth?

The belief that laxatives are effective for weight control is a myth. In fact, by the time laxatives act on the large intestine, most foods and calories have already been absorbed by the small intestine. Although laxatives artificially stimulate the large intestine to empty, the “weight loss” caused by a laxative-induced bowel movement contains little actual food, fat, or calories. Instead, laxative abuse causes the loss of water, minerals, electrolytes and indigestible fiber and wastes from the colon. This “water weight” returns as soon as the individual drinks any fluids and the body re-hydrates. If the chronic laxative abuser refuses to re-hydrate, she or he risks dehydration, which further taxes the organs and which may ultimately cause death.

Health consequences of laxative abuse:

- **Disturbance of electrolyte and mineral balances.** Sodium, potassium, magnesium, and phosphorus are electrolytes and minerals that are present in very specific amounts necessary for proper functioning of the nerves and muscles, including those of the colon and heart. Upsetting this delicate balance can cause improper functioning of these vital organs.
- **Severe dehydration** may cause tremors, weakness, blurry vision, fainting, kidney damage, and, in extreme cases, death. Dehydration often requires medical treatment.
- **Laxative dependency** occurs when the colon stops reacting to usual doses of laxatives so that larger and larger amounts of laxatives may be needed to produce bowel movements.
- **Internal organ damage** may result, including stretched or “lazy” colon, colon infection, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, and, rarely, liver damage. Chronic laxative abuse may contribute to risk of colon cancer.

Stopping the laxative abuse cycle:

Overcoming laxative abuse requires working with a team of health professionals who have expertise in treating eating disorders, including a general physician, a psychiatrist, psychologist, or counselor, and a registered dietician. Support from close friends and family is also helpful. Meeting with others to talk over anxieties, concerns and difficulties can greatly aid in getting through tough times in the recovery process.