

Laxative Misuse

Abuse of laxatives and enemas by people with eating disorders are common. This is an attempt to try to rush food through their bodies before the calories can be absorbed. Using laxative in this way can be extremely harmful, even potentially fatal. It is now well established that this is not an effective weight-loss method.

Emma has been using laxatives and enemas to control her weight for some time. Her mother says she is putting herself in danger. Is she just trying to scare and control me?

Mothers don't always know best BUT this is one time when they do. Laxatives and enemas should only be used for certain medical condition under the monitoring of a doctor and never ever as a method for regulating weight.

People with eating disorders abuse laxatives because they believe they can remove food from their bodies before the calories are absorbed (They can't. See below). Also, many are constipated. The little bit of food they allow themselves does not provide enough bulk to stimulate regular bowel movements.

Misusing laxatives and enemas can lead to serious, sometimes irreversible, sometimes fatal problems. Many people can successfully stop abusing laxatives/enemas even after long-term use provided they have the support they need.

Why can't laxative help me control my weight?

After I use the bathroom, I always weigh less than I did before.

A healthy bowel receives food residue from the stomach and small intestine. As the bowel fills, bulky faecal matter stimulates nerve endings, causing muscle contractions that rid the residue from the body in a bowel movement.

Laxatives and enemas artificially stimulate nerve endings in the large bowel, which is also called the colon. The colon is one of the last structures in the digestive tract. By the time food arrives there, nothing is left but indigestible fiber and other non-nutritive material.

Laxatives remove lots of water from the colon as well as food residue. It is this fluid loss which indicate weight-loss after a laxative-induced bowel movement, This fluid loss will always be regained. The ounces or pounds return as the body rehydrates after liquid intake.

Laxatives and enemas cannot stimulate the small intestine, the part of the GI tract where food is digested and where nutrients and calories are absorbed. The small

intestine does not even have the kinds of nerves that occur in the colon and respond to artificial stimulation.

In one experiment, a group of laxative abusers ate a high calorie meal. A group of normal people ate the same food, which totalled seven thousand calories. The laxative abusers took their purgatives of choice. The normal people let nature take its course. Researchers collected all the material passed in the bowel movements and tested it for calorie content. Even after consuming thousands of calories and massive amounts of laxatives, the laxative abusers managed to remove only about 100 extra calories from their bodies, the amount found in one small biscuit.

In what way will I do damage to myself by continuing to use laxative and enemas?

- The electrolyte balance will be skewed. Electrolytes are minerals like sodium and potassium that dissolve in the blood and other body fluids. They must be present in very specific amounts and exact ratios for proper functioning of nerves and muscles, including the heart muscle.
- Laxatives and enemas (also forced vomiting) can upset this balance by flushing essential minerals out of the body, resulting in muscle cramps, tremors, spasms, irregular heartbeat, and in some cases arrest. The heart stops, and unless the person receives immediate emergency medical treatment, s/he can die.
- Laxative and enemas (and also vomiting) remove needed fluid from the body. The resulting dehydration can lead to tremors, weakness, blurry vision, fainting spells, kidney damage, and in some cases death. Severe dehydration requires medical treatment. Drinking fluid may not hydrate cells and tissues quickly enough to prevent organ damage or death.
- Laxatives irritate intestinal nerve endings, which in turn stimulate muscle contractions that move the irritant through the gut and out of the body. After a while the nerve endings no longer respond to stimulation. The person must now take greater and greater amounts of laxatives to produce bowel movements. S/he has become laxative dependent and without artificial stimulation may not have any bowel movements.
- Laxatives and enemas strip away protective mucus that lines the colon, leaving it vulnerable to infection.
- Enemas can stretch the colon, which over time becomes a limp sack with no muscle tone. No longer can it generate the muscle contractions necessary to move faecal matter out of the body.
- Laxative abusers seem to have more trouble with the following problems than do non-users : irritable bowel syndrome (rectal pain, gas, and episodes of constipation and diarrhoea) and bowel tumours (both benign and cancerous)

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How can I stop the laxative and enema habit?

Ask your doctor for help. Your GP will have had other people do the same thing and he will not be shocked.

Take one step at a time. As your doctor advises, either taper off or go cold turkey. Expect to be anxious when time passes with no bowel movement and increasing feelings of fullness, bloat and discomfort. Your body needs time to regulate itself and relearn how to respond to natural cues. Remember most people who stick with their doctor's recommendations manage to stop laxatives and enemas and resume normal functioning after an initial period of discomfort.

Get enough fibre. Make sure you eat enough food, especially high-fibre items like whole grain, fresh fruits, and fresh vegetables. Eat the skin and peels too: they are usually high in fibre. An inexpensive, effective way to increase fibre in your diet is to add a few spoonfuls of unprocessed bran to soups, stews and cereals.

Combine a hot beverage and exercise. Drink a hot beverage (coffee or lemon juice in hot water are good choices), and then walk briskly for 30 minutes. The hot liquid and muscle movements in your legs and abdomen will help stimulate muscle contractions in the intestines.

Drink enough water. Drink lots of water during the day. Eight to Ten glasses daily. Remember tea/coffee are caffeinated fluids; caffeine pulls water out of your body instead of adding it to cells and tissues.

Go for a walk in the morning. Where possible take a walk each day. Walking gets your intestinal muscles working so they can move the contents of your digestive tract along and out of your body. A cup of coffee or hot water and lemon juice can also help to get things going too.

Eat breakfast! After breakfast, sit on the toilet for 5 – 10 minutes. Breakfast initiates a reflex that triggers the intestines to evacuate their contents.

Let your therapist help you deal with the anxiety that this recovery process may create. Remember you don't have to do this alone.