

Leicestershire Adult Eating Disorders Service

Health problems resulting from eating disorders

EXCESSIVE LAXATIVE USE

This leaflet provides information for patients about some of the physical problems that may result from the excessive use of laxatives. The aim of this is to provide you with information that is important to you, not to worry you or upset you. The information in this leaflet may raise questions to discuss with your doctor or therapist. It will help explain why you may need certain blood tests or other investigations.

©Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust, 2015. All rights reserved.

Leicestershire Adult Eating Disorders Service
Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust
Bennion Centre
Groby Road
Leicester
LE3 9DZ

Tele: 0116 225 2557

Author: Leicestershire Adult Eating Disorders Service
Reviewed: April 2025
Review due: April 2026

Excessive laxative use

- Laxative medications include Senokot, Movicol, Lactulose, Dulco-lax, Docusol, Fybogel and many other brands. Most are available over the counter without prescription.
- Misuse of a medication means taking it when it is not medically necessary or taking it in excess.
- Laxative misuse is a method people may use to try to get rid of food and reduce body weight. Some people use it to help themselves feel 'empty' or 'clean'.
- Some people with eating disorders complain of constipation, bloating or discomfort. However, when the bowel slows down because of insufficient food and fluid intake, or because stomach contents are being repeatedly vomited, then taking laxatives won't help.
- People may observe their weight has decreased after they have used large quantities of laxatives. However, any such weight loss is due entirely to a loss of body fluid. There is no true loss of body weight, fat, protein or calories. The nutrition and calories have already been absorbed by the time the food reached the large intestine.

Health problems caused by excessive laxative use

Laxative misuse causes dehydration due to loss of large quantities of fluid from the bowel. This can cause dizziness, fainting, tiredness and headache. In the longer-term, dehydration may cause kidney damage.

Laxative misuse can cause severe depletion of essential minerals, which are washed out with the fluid. The most worrying of these is potassium. Potassium is vital to life because of its role in the conduction of electrical impulses through the heart. When potassium levels in the body fall, the heart may lose its regular beating rhythm. This may cause faintness or loss of consciousness. At very low potassium levels, a cardiac arrest can occur, and death may follow.

Your doctor may check your potassium levels through a blood test, and

may do an ECG (electrocardiogram). You may require potassium supplements to boost your own levels. However, these measures won't help for long if the laxative misuse continues. The only lasting way to maintain normal safe potassium levels is to decrease and stop the misuse of laxatives.

Be aware that repeated vomiting, laxative misuse, and misuse of diuretics (water tablets) each lead to significant fluid and potassium loss. *In combination* these behaviours are particularly risky.

Laxative misuse can, in time, disturb the body's fluid balance. Some people will develop oedema (fluid retention usually in the ankles leading to swelling and puffiness). The excess fluid may falsely affect the weight.

Many laxatives work by stimulating the muscle wall of the bowels, which contract and push the contents through quicker. This artificial stimulation eventually leads to loss of bowel tone, the muscle wall becoming thinned and floppy, causing a 'stretched' or 'lazy' bowel. People sometimes react by increasing their laxative use, but this does not help. At this stage bowel function may be permanently weakened and slow, and even resumption of adequate food and fluid cannot restore it to normal. Many people end up suffering severe and long-term constipation, which is hard to treat.

Managing laxative misuse

If laxative misuse is an issue which concerns you please discuss this with your doctor or therapist. We can work with you to gradually reduce and stop these.

It is not advisable to abruptly stop laxatives without medical supervision.

If you have any questions or concerns about the information in this leaflet you can raise these with your doctor or therapist or leave a message with our secretaries on 0116 225 2557.