What are the Consequences of Abusing Laxatives?

Using laxatives when you do not have constipation, with the intention of trying to lose weight can cause medical complications. These depend on several factors, including the type of laxatives used, the amount used, and how long they have been used. Some of the more common complications of laxative abuse include:

- **Impaired bowel function.**

  Long term laxative abuse can lead to permanent impairment of bowel function. The bowel is a muscle and if you abuse laxatives your bowel can become reliant on the laxatives in order to work properly. In other words it becomes ‘lazy’. Bowel function may be permanently weakened and slow, and even the presence of adequate food and fluid cannot restore it to normal. Many people who abuse laxatives long term end up suffering severe and long term constipation, which will not respond to more laxative medication.

- **Electrolyte abnormalities.**

  Many people who abuse laxatives often demonstrate electrolyte imbalances. Electrolytes such as potassium, sodium, and chloride are important to life functions. With chronic diarrhoea, electrolytes are drawn out of the body through the faeces. This leads to an electrolyte imbalance in the body. This can be serious and in extreme cases, fatal. Symptoms of electrolyte disturbances include feeling faint, muscle weakness and palpitations.

- **Constipation.**

  Repeated use of laxatives actually causes constipation. This may lead people to increase the dosage of the amount of laxative, which in turn only worsens the constipation problem.

- **Oedema.**

  Laxatives cause fluid loss. Dramatic changes or fluctuations in fluid balance confuse the body causing it to retain fluid (oedema). Fluid retention usually in the ankles leading to swelling and puffiness.

- **Dehydration.**

  Laxatives cause fluid loss through the intestines. Dehydration then impairs body functioning. Dehydration can lead to faintness, tiredness and headache.
Helpful steps for coming off laxatives:

• If you have been taking laxatives for a short amount of time or in small quantities, you may be able to stop taking laxatives at once. It may be helpful to throw away any supplies that are in the house and do not buy any more.

• If you have been taking large doses of laxatives, or taking them for a long time, you need to cut down your laxative use gradually. Discuss this with your GP or specialist. You can do this by decreasing the amount you take each day or starting to have a laxative free days. It can be helpful to write this down so that you can gradually reduce your laxative use.

• Increase the amount of fibre in your diet to help prevent constipation and encourage your bowel to work regularly on its own. Foods that contain a lot of fibre include whole-grain breads, cereals, and crackers fruit, vegetables, baked beans and dried fruit. However, do not eat very large amounts of bran as this can interfere with the absorption of vitamins and minerals. Prunes and prune juice are not recommended because the ingredient in prunes that promotes bowel movements is actually an irritant laxative, and long-term use of prunes and prune juice can result in the same problem as long-term use of laxatives.

• Drink plenty of fluid - at least 8 - 10 cups per day as this helps to prevent constipation. Restricting your fluid intake at this time promotes dehydration and only worsens the constipation. You may feel bloated and experience an increase in weight initially, but this is TEMPORARY and caused by rebound fluid retention. If you stop taking laxatives, and eat a healthy diet, you will NOT become overweight.

• Don’t replace laxatives with other dangerous methods of losing weight - e.g. avoiding food or vomiting.

• Write down the frequency of your bowel movements on a sheet of paper. If you are constipated for more than 3 days, discuss it with your doctor, dietitian, or therapist.