

Laxatives – Misuse

Do people misuse laxatives?

Sadly, a small number of people, mostly from those suffering from eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, misuse laxatives in a misguided attempt to lose weight or prevent weight gain. Laxatives do not help weight loss - taken in this way only encourages the body to lose water which is regained almost immediately.

What are the dangers of taking too many laxatives?

Some kinds of laxatives are suitable for long-term under medical supervision. Others are only suitable for short-term use, in particular stimulant laxatives.

Laxative misuse can lead to dehydration, which results in a range of problems such as headaches, bloating and feeling faint and tired.

Essential minerals present in the fluid in the bowel can also start to be lost. The most important is potassium, which plays a vital role in the function of nerves, particularly the nerves of the heart. Low potassium levels can cause an irregular heartbeat.

Long-term use of stimulant laxatives can disturb the electrolyte balance of the body, leading to a lazy bowel that is permanently weakened and long-term constipation.

How is the sale of laxatives regulated?

As with all over-the-counter (OTC) medicines in the UK, laxatives are regulated by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). MHRA constantly monitors products and reviews emerging evidence to ensure that medicines work and are acceptably safe.

OTC medicines are classified as either:

Pharmacy (P) – which can only be sold or supplied at registered pharmacy premises by or under the supervision of a pharmacist.

General sale list (GSL) – which can be sold from a wider range of premises such as supermarkets.

There are laxative products available in both the P and GSL categories. GSL products can be sold without prescription and outside pharmacies only when the MHRA considers it is safe to allow this. All laxative pack sizes can legally be sold in supermarkets and non-pharmacy outlets but manufacturers restrict sales of larger packs to pharmacies where advice is available. The packs all include dosage instructions, warnings and information about how to use the product safely.

What warnings are given on the packaging and patient information leaflet?

All OTC laxative products give information about how long the product can be safely used for. Examples of statements include:

- “As with all laxatives, (product name) should not be taken every day for long periods. If you need laxatives every day, or if you have abdominal pain which does not go away, you should see your doctor.”
- Do not take for long periods of time (in general more than a week), unless your doctor tells you too.”

In addition to statements about the duration of use, MHRA also recommends for OTC laxative products that may be subject to overuse, that the patient information leaflet includes a warning statement to the effect that laxatives do not aid weight loss¹. For example:

- “Laxatives do not help long-term weight loss (and taking them regularly for a long time may harm your health.”
- “Laxatives should not be used to help you lose weight (and taking them regularly for a long time may harm your health).”

What has been done to address the problem?

The industry takes very seriously its responsibilities to ensure that laxatives are sold and promoted in a way that best informs and educates the public on their proper use. The provision of information which gets this message across to the people who are using them inappropriately is encouraged.

Should laxatives be made pharmacy only medicines?

Constipation is very common. PAGB research found that 18% of people had experienced constipation in the last year².

Allowing wider access to laxatives through non pharmacy outlets means people can obtain fast relief when suffering the occasional nasty bout of constipation. Some people also find asking for such products embarrassing and prefer the convenience of just picking up a pack from the shelf.

The vast majority of people use laxatives sensibly for short-term use and according to the instructions. They should not be penalized by the misguided actions of a few.

The Eating Disorders Association believes that 90,000 people are receiving treatment for anorexia and bulimia in the UK³ and that many of these people misuse laxatives. However, both these illnesses are serious mental health conditions caused by many different contributable factors. There is no evidence to suggest that restricting access to laxatives would help reduce misuse or reduce the incidence of these conditions.

¹ Guidance on information in the PIL to address areas of potential misuse or abuse of over-the-counter (OTC) antihistamine sleep aid and laxative medicines, MHRA / VRMM, April 2009

² A picture of health – A survey of the nation's approach to everyday health and wellbeing, PAGB / Reader's Digest, 2005

³ Beat: <http://www.b-eat.co.uk/PressMediaInformation/Somestatics>