

Ineffectiveness of Purging

Purgatives

Purging refers to the ways some women with eating disorders try to get rid of food to prevent weight gain. Some women vomit, or exercise excessively (more than is needed to keep fit and healthy), or restrict their food. Others take various drugs which they believe will help them lose weight or look thinner. Substances which are taken with the purpose of bringing about weight loss through purging are called purgatives. These include drugs which induce vomiting (emetics), induce urination (diuretics), and induce diarrhoea (laxatives).

Diuretics

Diuretics are substances which bring about increased urination. Most diuretics are tablets, either prescribed by a doctor, or available over-the-counter. Some other substances such as caffeine also have a diuretic effect. It is thought that around one third of women with eating disorders have used diuretics at some time, and that a small number use them daily (about 1%). Generally these women use diuretics to counteract weight gain which happens with premenstrual water retention.

Diuretics have no effect at all on eliminating calories or body fat or body mass. It is only water that is lost, which results in changes in the balance of electrolytes in the body. Repeated use of diuretics can result in serious medical problems, including heart problems, related to electrolyte imbalance. Overuse of caffeine can result in restlessness, insomnia, irritability, nervousness, and gastrointestinal problems, as well as increased urination.

Often if you use diuretics regularly, more of the drug may be needed to get the same effect (tolerance). Regular use may lead to long-term water retention when you do stop taking diuretics.

Emetics

Emetics are substances taken to induce vomiting. Emetics are recommended to bring about vomiting when someone has swallowed some kind of poison. However, around 30% of women with eating disorders are thought to have used emetics at some time, to make vomiting easier, or if they feel compelled to vomit, but find that they are physically unable to do so.

Some emetics take a long time to clear from the body, so that the drug builds up. This is especially true if you have been taking emetics regularly, since tolerance can occur (vomiting becomes more difficult and more of the drug may be needed to bring about vomiting). This is extremely dangerous, as these drugs are highly toxic above certain doses. In addition to the nausea and vomiting induced by emetics, medical complications include gastrointestinal

problems, such as bloody diarrhoea, muscle weakness, rapid heart rate, chest pain, shortness of breath, low blood pressure, irregular heartbeat, and cardiac arrest (heart failure).

Laxatives

Laxatives are substances which get rid of food matter in the bowel by increasing stool volume, or speeding up the passage of food through the gut. Some laxatives act by increasing muscle activity which moves food through the intestine more quickly, others coat the stool with oil, or soften it, or increase the amount of water or fibre in the stool so that it moves more quickly.

Many women with eating disorders have used laxatives believing that laxatives counteract the effects of eating or bingeing and help lose weight. Studies show that between 38 and 75% of women with bulimia use laxatives.

Although women with eating disorders report that they use laxatives because they believe this will get rid of the food they have eaten, research does not support this. One study found that the number of calories digested is decreased by less than 10% after laxative use, in spite of there being large quantities of diarrhoea produced (4-6 litres). This is because mainly water (along with valuable electrolytes) is lost, not calories, and because laxatives primarily affect the emptying of the **large** intestine which occurs **after** calories from food have already been absorbed from the small intestine.

Regular use of laxatives can lead to medical problems including recurrent diarrhoea, weakness, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, dehydration, electrolyte imbalance (in particular, low levels of potassium), finger clubbing or swelling, skin problems, and heart problems. Many of the problems seen with regular laxative use are likely to be caused by chronic dehydration. Dehydration occurs because the main effect of laxatives is to cause diarrhoea which is simply an increase in the amount of water in the stool. Dehydration has many side effects including dizziness and fainting, chronic fatigue, confusion, increased body temperature, kidney failure and in severe cases, death.

Regular use may also mean that greater amounts of the laxative are needed to get the same effect (tolerance). Sometimes women who abuse laxatives for too long lose the ability for their bowels to move normally without laxatives, because laxatives also affect the nerves that cause the muscles of the bowel to contract. In these cases, specialised retraining and sometimes surgery is required in order to help the muscles function again.

In addition, there are side-effects which occur when you try to stop using laxatives. These include water retention, constipation, increased anxiety (feeling edgy, irritable, tense, angry), and urges to take laxatives ("cravings"). Although these side-effects can be uncomfortable and distressing at first, within a short time (usually about 2 weeks), your body becomes used to not taking laxatives and the side-effects will reduce.

Appetite suppressants

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Appetite suppressants (including diet pills, and some other medicines) are often taken by women with eating disorders in an attempt to curb their appetite, so they feel like eating less in the hope of losing weight. These substances may be prescription drugs, or over-the-counter pills or medicines, or common substances such as caffeine. Studies report that quarter to half of women with eating disorders have used appetite suppressants at some time. There is very little evidence that appetite suppressants actually result in weight loss over time.

In addition, some appetite suppressants can cause serious medical problems, including increases in blood pressure, seizures, bleeding in the brain, cardiac irregularities, respiratory problems, and psychosis. These effects may be greater when certain appetite suppressants are taken with other substances, including caffeine.