



Physical effects of disordered eating behaviours

Bingeing, vomiting, laxative and medication misuse

There can be a wide range of compensatory and/or compulsive behaviours as part of an eating disorder. These behaviours are distressing and potentially harmful. Behaviours may include food restriction, excessive activity/exercise, bingeing and purging via vomiting, laxative or medication misuse. Each has its own problems alone or in combination and may result in serious health consequences.

Bingeing

Eating large amounts of food over a short period of time is known as bingeing, and involves feeling a lack of control and distress over the type and amount of food eaten. Bingeing can be triggered by hunger caused by food restriction, having and breaking food rules, mood related triggers or disinhibition that may come from alcohol or drug use. Eating food in this way can lead to a feeling of uncomfortable fullness, guilt, shame and distress. For some people, this can lead to vomiting and/or laxative/ medication misuse, over exercise or further food restriction.

Bingeing can stretch the stomach so that it becomes difficult to recognise true hunger and satiety (feeling pleasantly satisfied after eating for a reasonable length of time). In extreme cases, bingeing can cause ulcers or tears in the oesophagus or stomach.

Those who binge and restrict sometimes feel that if they ate 'normally' they would gain weight, however this is not usually the case. Once the binge/purge behaviours cease, weight often stabilises. It is also important to be realistic about what is a sustainable weight, as you may desire a weight, which is lower than natural for you. Your treatment team can discuss this with you further.

Medication misuse

Medications that have not been prescribed for you can be very dangerous to your health. These might include tablets that are prescribed to change the amount of fluid in the body or effect metabolism. Some herbal medicines and recreational drugs can also cause problems with appetite control, mood, bowel function etc. If you are misusing such substances please talk to your GP so they can help you safely stop using these.

Vomiting

Getting rid of food by vomiting is hazardous. The muscles of the stomach and oesophagus are designed to hold food in the stomach. Teaching them to work backwards can result in permanent damage and an unpleasant condition known as reflux (when food spontaneously travels back into the mouth). Vomiting can cause tears and bleeding in the stomach wall and oesophagus. It can cause small blood vessels in the face and eyes to rupture and bleed.

Research has shown that **vomiting is ineffective** in getting rid of all the calories/energy eaten. This is because digestion begins in the mouth, then continues with the stomach and small intestine. So even if you vomit all the contents of your stomach many of the calories will have already been absorbed.

Frequent vomiting can also cause damage to teeth, mouth, throat and hands. Vomit is highly acidic, this can permanently damage to tooth enamel, gums and inflame salivary glands causing swelling of the face. The unnatural loss of the acid from your stomach can disturb the fine chemical balance of your body (electrolytes).

If you are purging it is important that your medical team is made aware. The loss of excessive electrolytes and fluid can lead to a rapid drop in potassium levels in your blood which can affect the heart muscle and even cause death.

Laxatives

Substances that change bowel function come in a variety of forms. They vary from commonly available foodstuffs to a variety of chemical medications. Some people report that laxatives

make them feel 'cleansed and empty', however they do not reduce the amount of energy (calories or kilojoules) that is absorbed by the body.

Laxatives can drastically reduce and disrupt potassium levels in your body and this can have serious health effects, such as abnormal heart rhythms and confusion, particularly if you are also vomiting.

Laxative abuse can also lead to dehydration as laxatives cause you to lose fluid; the body responds by trying to protect itself from dehydration by retaining fluid (oedema), this may appear as swelling.

Excessive straining when going to the toilet can cause blood vessels in the bowel to become fragile and bleed (haemorrhoids) or tissue to herniate and protrude from the rectum (rectal prolapse). If you think you may have these problems do talk to your GP about it as it is uncomfortable and medical help is important.

Below is a table summarising common laxatives. Well-researched, successful techniques exist to help modify and stop these behaviours. Letting someone know what you are doing is the first step.

Type of product	The way it works	Negative effects
Foodstuffs such as high fibre cereals, unprocessed bran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases the water content and bulk of the stool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excessive use can cause wind, bloating, feeling full, blockages and reduce the absorption of certain vital nutrients from food.
Commercial fibre preparations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adequate fluid intake is essential 	
Prunes, some herbal preparations Senna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most act as a chemical irritant, which makes the bowel contract more strongly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overuse can result in the bowel becoming unable to contract normally without the extra stimulation. This can lead to chronic constipation and a lazy bowel. Potassium loss leading to life threatening side effects. Dehydration can result.
Chemical stool softeners		
Liquorice, certain lollies and gum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fluid enters the digestive tract via osmosis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Severe bloating, cramps and diarrhoea. This may heighten ones concerns of 'feeling fat' because of a distended abdomen.