

Laxatives and Antidiarrhoeals

Bowel habits vary among individuals. It can be normal to have bowel movement one to two times a day or once every other day. However, if the stools are dry and difficult to pass, or if bowel evacuation occurs only once every several days, it can be called constipation. On the other hand, frequent passage of loose or watery stools is diarrhoea.

Classification of Laxatives

Laxatives can be classified into four categories according to their functions:

The first category refers to laxatives which help form bulky stools and promote peristalsis in the colon for easier passage of stools. They do not work until after a few days of consumption. Psyllium is an example.

The second category refers to stimulative laxatives which stimulate peristalsis in the colon to enable passage of stools. Examples are bisacodyl and senna leaves.

The third category refers to lubricants which can soften the stools for easier passage. They are available in the form of pills, liquids, suppositories and enemas. Examples are glycerin suppositories and liquid paraffin.

The fourth category refers to laxatives which draw moisture into the colon wall to form bulky and soft stools and facilitate colon movement for the passage of the softened stools. One example is lactulose.

Classification of Antidiarrhoeals

Antidiarrhoeals can be classified into two categories according to their functions:

The first category refers to antidiarrhoeal adsorbents. They work best on mild chronic diarrhoea. Kaolin is an example.

The second category refers to inhibitors of intestinal movement. They control diarrhoea by producing a direct relieving effect on intestinal peristalsis. Diphenoxylate is an example.

Proper Use of the Drugs

Constipation or diarrhoea cannot be treated by medication alone. Very often constipation is a chronic condition and medication can only provide short-term relief. Over-dependence on medication makes it difficult to develop normal bowel movements. Prolonged medication affects nutrient absorption and causes malnutrition.

There are many causes leading to diarrhoea. Antidiarrhoeals can only relieve or stop diarrhoea temporarily but cannot bring about a radical cure. In case of diarrhoea caused by intestinal infections, antidiarrhoeal drugs may hinder the evacuation of harmful bacteria in the intestines and give rise to further problems. In addition, diarrhoea may also be caused by intestinal sensitivity and mental stress. As such, the correct approach is to find out the real cause of the illness and receive proper treatment. Indiscriminate self-medication should be avoided.

Life Adaptations

People suffering from constipation should drink plenty of fluid and eat high-fibre food such as vegetables, fruits or whole-wheat bread. Lead a regular life. Do moderate exercise regularly and stay happy. Do not smoke. Avoid stimulating beverages such as coffee and alcohol. Developing a regular bowel habit is most preferable. Eating a small amount of food or drink a glass of cold water on an empty stomach when waking up in the morning, for example, could stimulate the urge for bowel movement and help the passage of stools.

People with diarrhoea should take plenty of rest and avoid greasy food. Eat light food and drink plenty of fluid such as thin congee, clear soup or fruit juice to supplement the water lost.

Warning Signs

A sudden change from normal bowel movements such as having frequent constipation, loose stools or stools with mucus or even blood, you should take caution as they could imply colon anomalies. Do not ignore these warnings and seek medical consultation immediately.

Storage of the Drugs

The drugs should be kept in a cool and dry place. Generally, they do not need to be refrigerated unless otherwise stated in the drug labels. Also, they should be stored properly to avoid accidents of mistaken consumption by children.