

[IMAGE]

Cleanse Your Body

By Kelly Kwiatkowski

Are you considering a fast or a detox diet? It's not unusual for people to do this kind of "cleansing" after the holiday season. Many of us have been running around, preparing for the holidays, eating too much and not exercising enough. And, after all of the overindulgence and stress, we want to begin a healthier new year.

What is Cleansing?

Cleansing is a dietary practice more commonly known as a detox diet or fast. It is used to promote health and healing by reducing toxic intake and removing toxins from the body. The concept of cleansing has a long history in natural medicine and has been practiced for thousands of years. Many alternative medical practices, including naturopathic, Chinese and ayurvedic medicine, still utilize cleansing as part of their healing traditions. Today, cleansing has become extremely popular, with several detox programs on the market. The wide variety of cleansing programs or detox diets include different combinations of therapeutic components such as cleansing herbs, juice or water fasting, whole-food or raw-food diets, colonic irrigation and hydrotherapy.

Woman drinking a glass of water. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark What is common across all detoxification programs is that you will eat differently, usually much less, so you can support the elimination of toxins from your body. These programs are usually short-term and emphasize whole, organic, non-genetically-modified foods (especially fruits and vegetables) that provide the vitamins, nutrients and antioxidants the body needs for detoxification. These foods, along with cleansing herbs, teas or juices (depending on the program), support the elimination of toxins in a number of ways, such as increasing the frequency of bowel movements and urination and supporting the detoxification functions of the liver. Processed and refined foods and alcohol are limited or excluded from the diet and a higher intake of water is also common.

Why Cleanse?

Cleansing is often used as a way to improve the diet, lose weight, increase energy and improve digestion. Typically, these programs are designed to support the body's natural cleansing mechanisms in the removal

of toxins. This is important because toxin accumulation in the body and poor nutrition contribute to ill health and chronic disease. Our industrial world produces and exposes us to thousands of chemicals through the air, the water supply and our foods. Daily, we are exposed to pollutants, pesticides and household chemicals which research shows are not biodegradable and which are present in our bodies by the hundreds. Evidence suggests many of these chemicals can alter or disrupt our immune, endocrine, nervous and reproductive systems.

Fortunately, our bodies have built-in defense systems designed to eliminate toxins to maintain health. However, research shows that our bodies are becoming overburdened by repeated toxic exposure. In addition, many of us are not eating healthy enough to support our body's detoxification functions. This leads to what researchers call "oxidative stress." Oxidative stress is thought to be a major contributor to many chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease, cancer, neurological diseases, autoimmune diseases and diabetes.

What Do the Experts Say?

There is no empirical scientific evidence on the health effects of detoxification diets. However, studies on various plants and herbs show positive effects on certain detoxification organ systems. The strongest evidence that supports dietary detoxification programs is related to caloric restriction and fasting. Caloric restriction and fasting are sometimes used in detoxification programs, either separately or together, although fasting is more commonly used. Fasting is the elimination of food and drink (with the exception of water) for a period of time for either therapeutic or religious reasons. Research suggests fasting can lower blood pressure, regulate blood glucose, lower cholesterol and reduce inflammation. Studies have shown, however, that in order to sustain the health benefits of fasting, individuals need to modify their diets over the long term. Following up a fast with a vegetarian diet has been shown to prolong the fast's health benefits.

Woman taking a bite of an apple. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Caloric restriction is the practice of reducing calorie intake. Research conducted over the past 70 years has shown that reducing the consumption of dietary calories 30 percent to 40 percent can extend the lifespan in a number of animal species. It is believed to slow the process of aging and delay the onset of chronic diseases associated with aging. Animal studies have shown that caloric restriction can reduce the incidence of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, autoimmune disorders and neurological decline. Long-term studies of caloric restriction in nonhuman primates and shorter, more limited studies in humans demonstrated decreased body

weight, blood pressure and blood lipids as well as regulated blood sugar. Caloric restriction is also linked to decreased free-radical production, which may help reduce oxidative stress.

A Note On Nutrition

What you eat is as important, if not more important, than merely eating less. There is a strong link between nutrition and disease. Diets that are high in calories, particularly saturated fats and processed or refined foods, are linked to a higher risk for many chronic diseases. Evidence suggests that high intake of fruits and vegetables, along with limited intake of calories, saturated fats and cholesterol, reduces oxidative stress and may lower the risk of all-cause mortality, cancer and cardiovascular disease. Eating nutrient-rich foods is also important because the chemical compounds in these foods play an important role in supporting your body's detoxification processes. For example, certain chemicals from cruciferous vegetables like broccoli or brussels sprouts affect the enzyme detoxification functions of your liver.

So, detoxification diets that emphasize whole foods - natural, unrefined, unprocessed foods like fruits and vegetables - may help to support your body's detoxification functions and decrease oxidative stress.

Integrating more whole foods into your diet after cleansing also may help you sustain the health benefits of your cleanse.

Common Cleansing Practices

Herbal Cleansing

Herbal cleansing is the practice of taking herbs while on a detoxification diet to stimulate specific detoxification organs in the body such as the liver, kidneys or intestines. Herbal detoxification sometimes utilizes herbal teas or herbal supplements. Some examples of herbs used in herbal detoxification programs include milk thistle and cayenne to cleanse the liver, juniper berries to cleanse the kidneys, and psyllium husk to cleanse the bowel.

Colonic Irrigation

Colonic irrigation involves flushing the colon with water to remove toxins.

Fasting

Fasting is the elimination of food and drink (with the exception of water) for a period of time for either therapeutic or religious reasons. Therapeutic fasts are thought to aid the body in eliminating toxins and have been used to treat a whole host of conditions including rheumatoid arthritis, obesity, diabetes, lupus, high

blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, psoriasis and asthma. Therapeutic fasts vary in duration and composition. Some allow patients to drink vegetable and/or fruit juices.

Caloric Restriction

Caloric restriction, applied in alternative practice, is used by life extensionists (people who seek to extend their lives through various practices). Unlike fasting, caloric restriction is simply the practice of reducing dietary calories. It is intended to prolong life by preventing disease and slowing the process of aging. Fasting and caloric restriction are sometimes used in detoxification programs either separately or together, although fasting is more commonly used. Caloric restriction is often used as a follow-up, long-term dietary intervention after a detoxification program or a fast is complete.

Raw-Food Diet

The raw-food diet is based on 70 percent to 100 percent uncooked and unprocessed raw foods. These foods mainly consist of fruits, vegetables, sprouted grains, seeds, nuts and beans. It is thought that heating foods destroys the health-promoting enzymes in the foods - enzymes regarded as important for digestion.

A healthy looking woman smiling at he camera. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark *Hydrotherapy*

Hydrotherapy is the use of water for healing. It may involve various kinds of bathing in different temperatures, or the use of steam or ice. Some practices include steam bathing, saunas, aquatic exercising, and colonic or nasal irrigation. Sometimes these practices are combined with aromatherapy.

Whole-Food Diet

A whole-food diet consists primarily of natural, unrefined, unprocessed foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, lean meats, fish and dairy. Proponents of whole-food diets say that the foods should be organic whenever possible. Meats, dairy and eggs should also be organic or free range. Examples of diets that emphasize whole foods are the DASH diet and the Mediterranean diet.

Juicing

Juicing is the preparation and consumption of drinks made from whole fruits and/or vegetables. Juicing is common during fasts or detoxification programs because juices are believed to be easily digestible, nutrient-rich, enzyme-rich and supportive of toxin removal.

Before You Cleanse

You should always consult your health care professional before doing a cleanse or a detox diet, especially if you have a medical condition. Detox diets are not advised for children or women who are pregnant or nursing.

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