

The myth of detox

There are plenty of quick-fix solutions out there, but ridding your body of toxins needn't entail starvation or drinking litres of water. In fact, it's a lot simpler than you might think. Helen Foster explains why.

The theory behind detoxing goes like this: modern life exposes us to higher levels of toxins (in the form of fat, sugar and alcohol, or nastier pollutants such as heavy metals) than ever before. This level of toxicity overwhelms our bodies, causing a build-up of pollutants, which then trigger health problems. Fans of detoxing claim that by flushing out these toxins, you give your body a rest from overload and atone for your seasonal sins.

But detoxing has its detractors, and they're growing in number. 'Fashionable fads claiming to cleanse the body and reduce weight carry serious risks,' says Durban-based detox coach Debby Fisher. 'They push the body into starvation mode and place enormous strain on metabolic functions. Inevitably, once you start eating again, you regain the weight.' Fisher

asserts that while it is true that we absorb toxins on a daily basis, it's also important to know that our body has its own built-in machinery to remove most toxins. This ensures that the majority of the poisons we're exposed to are eliminated before build-up can occur.

LET NATURE TAKE ITS COURSE

But what about the alcohol, fat, caffeine and kilojoule surplus that we consume over weekends and holidays? Well, it seems the body copes with them, too. One of the biggest 'experiments' on the danger of overindulgence associated with modern diets was the movie *Super Size Me*, in which US film-maker Morgan Spurlock consumed only McDonald's fast food for a month. Part of the way into his investigation, doctors were so frightened by the effects on his liver that they begged him to stop. ■■►



However, at Sweden's University of Linköping, Dr Frederik Nyström has repeated the *Super Size Me* experiment under clinical conditions – with very different results. While levels of liver enzymes indicating toxic liver damage initially went up, these had normalised within three weeks. His subjects' livers adapted to the overload. 'The concept that the detoxification organs get tired when you constantly expose them to pollutants just isn't true,' says Dr Peter Pressman of the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, who has a special interest in detoxing. The reason for this, he explains, is that detoxification is one of the systems in the body that are controlled by 'inducible enzymes'. The enzymes that 'clean' the body are only produced when exposed to the toxins for elimination, and if levels of these increase, so does enzymatic production.

DON'T GO TO EXTREMES

Of course, not every toxin that we're exposed to does leave our system. The body can only excrete some pollutants (including chemical pesticides and heavy metals) in small quantities – but any excess is bound in the fat stores where it can't cause harm. During a stringent detox, these are released into the system – but that is not necessarily good news.

In research at Quebec's Laval University, it was found that when women went on strict kilojoule-restricted diets such as detoxes, chemicals called organochlorines (linked to hormone-dependent cancers such as breast cancer) were released from fat stores into the bloodstream – where they then stayed. And if you're one of the many women who are detoxing in order to lose weight as well as lower toxicity levels, there's more bad news.

According to Dr Angelo Tremblay, who worked on the trial: 'We found that the hyper-concentration of plasma organochlorines attenuates a decrease in resting energy expenditure and of triiodothyronine, a thyroid hormone controlling energy metabolism. They



The clinically proven detox plan

Any diet plan that helps you increase your exposure to fresh – ideally organic – foods will have a cleansing effect on your system. But if you like the discipline of an organised regime to cleanse your body, this is based on the Oregon trial plan (see main story).

For the first three days you can eat:

- Basmati white rice, legumes (i.e. beans, lentils, chickpeas, peas), nuts and seeds.
- Flavourings, including organic butter, olive, sunflower or flaxseed oils, and all herbs and spices other than salt.
- Any fruits or vegetables (but limit those listed below).

On days four to seven, add in:

- Turkey and fish, plus grains – including buckwheat, millet, quinoa and brown rice.

Food and drinks to limit:

- Any that are known to cause allergies or intolerance in some people, such as dairy products, wheat, eggs, tomatoes, potatoes and citrus fruits.
- Avoid concentrated sweets, anything containing caffeine or alcohol.

Take a good multivitamin and mineral supplement for the duration of the plan.

seem to weaken the metabolic furnace of the body.' In other words, you could find it easier to put on weight post-detox than before.

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT

So does this mean that we should forget the post-holiday clean-up? Not necessarily. 'Adopting a healthy, well-balanced detox regime on a regular basis helps your body rest and restores vital organs,' says Fisher.

Taking a break doesn't mean that you have to embark on a water fast or consume carrots until your skin turns orange. Merely eating clean, simple foods is enough to have positive effects on the body. In fact, one of the few trials that has studied the effects of detox dieting used a plan following exactly those rules. For seven days, researchers at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland, Oregon, put a number of volunteers on a diet plan and eliminated dietary toxins such as caffeine and alcohol, and also excluded foods linked to intolerances, such as wheat and dairy.

At the end of the trial, not only did participants say they felt improvements in symptoms, such as fatigue, headaches and allergies, but the detox function of their liver actually improved by 53 percent.

So put down the bean sprouts, stop stressing about how to juice veggies in your lunch break and release yourself from mood swings caused by low blood sugar. This year, help your body purify itself by putting clean, natural foods into it. Your body – and mind – will thank you. ▶

Win a skin detox

Psychologies is giving away a Decléor Detox Coffret, including Aromessence Contour and Expert Contour, to the value of R885, to five lucky readers.

■ To enter, SMS the word DECLEOR, plus your name and city, to 34912 (each SMS costs R2). Entries close on XX May 2008.

STANDARD COMPETITION RULES APPLY. SEE PAGE XXX.

Small changes you can make to help your body detoxify naturally

Your home

1. Leave shoes outside

Not only do the carpets of people who wear their shoes at home contain high levels of lead, researchers at the Southwest Research Institute in San Antonio, Texas, have found residue from pesticides sprayed up to five years earlier in carpet fibre.

2. Open your windows

The air in the average home is up to five times more polluted than the air outside, due to the collection of fumes from cleaning products and synthetic furnishings.

3. Switch to natural cleansers

It takes just five ingredients to clean most homes – beeswax, baking soda, salt, white vinegar and lemon juice. Between them, they can replace bleach, air fresheners, polish and more.

5. Watch your cooking utensils

Remove convenience foods from plastic packaging before cooking – heating has the potential to leach chemicals from the plastics into the food. And be careful with metal pans. Exposure to high aluminium levels in the diet is potentially linked to Alzheimer's Disease. Scratched pans and those washed in bleach, which

dissolves the protective coating, also increase the risk of leakage.

Your diet

1. Go organic Research from the University of Ghent in Belgium estimated that the average diet exposes us to 54 chemicals a day; organic food has lower toxic exposure.

2. Remember the phrase 'good food goes bad'

If something can live in your fridge for weeks, it's probably not going to reduce your toxic load.

3. Buy produce inside

Fruit and vegetables displayed on roadside stalls or outside shops on busy roads can be polluted by the heavy metals from exhaust fumes.

4. Know the natural toxin collectors

Just as the body stores heavy metals in fat, it also stores those that enter animals. For this reason, it's suggested you don't eat fat on meats and, when you eat oily fish, choose those less affected by mercury contamination. Scientists believe that large, oily fish (they live longer), such as marlin, tuna and swordfish, pose a problem, because mercury levels build up over over time.