

“Detox” Diets – Do they really work?

The start of another year usually means the end to Christmas and New Year parties, or shall we call it festive eating. For some, weight loss or more exercise might top their agenda of new years resolutions for 2010 - for others ‘detox’ could be their start up to this year. In a bid to rid their bodies of so called ‘toxins’ that might have built up over that period of indulgence, people often ‘detox’ or ‘cleanse’. You need to stop and ask yourself a few questions before you fervently go ahead and start this ‘detox’ process:

- ♥ What are ‘detox’ diets all about?
- ♥ Are there specific products or treatments available that claim to work?
- ♥ Are there risks involved when following these diets and, most importantly, do we actually need to ‘detox’?

These are some of the concerns this article aims to address with the hope of providing more clarity around the issue of ‘detoxification’.

What are ‘detox’ diets all about?

The belief is that foods and drinks contain toxins that accumulate in the body over time, thus requiring the body to go through a process of ‘detoxification’ or ‘cleansing’ in an attempt to restore good health. Some plans restrict all solid foods, allowing only liquids; some plans only entail vegetable purees while others call for the intake of spices and fruit juices. The duration also differs from requiring adherence for 3 days up to 2 weeks and sometimes even a month! Suggested foods include fruit and vegetable juice, black tea or coffee, rooibos tea, water, fresh, raw fruits, vegetables and yoghurt. There are plenty of these diets circulating and all claim to provide the following ‘benefits’ to its users:

- Flushing out toxins from the body
- Weight loss
- Overall wellness
- More alert and energetic
- Fewer headaches
- Clearer skin
- Regular bowel movements
- Improved digestion
- Improved immune system

Are there specific ‘detox’ products and treatments?

You will be very surprised to see how many different types of over-the-counter products there are available and that promise ‘safe, natural detoxification’. These ‘herbal’ products and enemas are recommended to attain ‘colonic cleanliness’. In fact, many of these contain harsh laxatives and/or diuretics which can cause more harm than good.

In 2007, a major detox scam was uncovered where most beauty salons and health resorts were found to be using an electronic device that claimed to ‘detox’ the body. An electric current and some salt were added to water and, after 30 minutes, the water discolored brown, which apparently showed that ‘detoxification’ occurred. Upon investigation from experts it was found that this was a hoax as, naturally, when an electric current is passed through water containing salt, the electrodes rust, hence producing the brown water! Unfortunately, many innocents fall victim to this kind of scam. So be very wary around these products that claim to miraculously ‘cleanse’ and make you feel full of energy!

Is there a risk?

Any diet that is taken to the extreme (as with these diets) can be risky, especially for certain vulnerable groups including pregnant women, children, teenagers, elderly and those with chronic conditions like diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease. The risk is increased further when these diets are followed for extended periods of time or repeated frequently due to the fact that they are all extremely low in calories and nutritionally unbalanced. These diets can also lead to a range of unpleasant side effects including:

- becoming faint due to low blood sugar levels
- irritability, headaches and fatigue (due to caffeine withdrawal rather than toxin removal)
- constipation due to an increased fibre intake without drinking an adequate amount of water
- liquid bowel movements from laxative use. Laxatives interfere with the natural function of the bowels and, if abused, can lead to loss of peristalsis (the process which naturally removes waste products through muscle contraction in the bowel), hence making one dependent on laxatives

- frequent urination as some products contain diuretics which causes one to urinate more than usual
Diuretics, when used in excess, can lead to dehydration and loss of essential vitamins and minerals
- Regaining of lost weight once the diet has stopped – this occurs as the weight loss that is generally seen on these diets is due to loss of water and lean body mass, not fat mass. Once normal eating has resumed, the weight is picked up again. Note that one might feel a little better after starting a ‘detox’ diet but this is due to some weight loss and not toxin shedding

Do we actually need to ‘detox’? What does the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa recommend?

The body’s liver and kidneys make up the filtration system, which naturally detoxifies the body every minute of each day – a perfectly good job that is done without any external interference. There is very little evidence to support the use of these diets, ‘herbal’ products and treatments. In fact it would be far more rewarding to follow the principles of moderation when it comes to eating. As a start, just by cutting back on high fat, sugary foods or even reducing the amount of alcohol you consume, you will be doing your body a world of good - perhaps you might even lose a few of those extra kilos.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) recommends following general healthy principles which includes a diet high in fibre and low in fat (particularly saturated and trans fats) with particular focus on good fats. Drink plenty of water and limit intake of drinks containing caffeine, sugar and alcohol. Fibre in the diet together with adequate fluid intake will help promote good bowel movements and prevent constipation. Coupled with eating healthily, exercise regularly – try to be physically active for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week.

It is still advisable to avoid indulging at certain times of the year and then later try to fix it by following a drastic diet which can essentially lead to other problems. It would be best to avoid those ‘detox’ diets, products and treatments that claim to naturally ‘cleanse’ your body - follow an overall healthy lifestyle and let your body do what it has been designed to!

Written by Ayesha Seedat, Registered Dietitian, the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa.

For more free heart smart nutritional advice from a registered dietitian, call our Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222, email heart&heartfoundation.co.za or visit our website www.heartfoundation.co.za