

Detox Diets: Good or Bad for You?



Celebrities go on them, they encourage you to consume stuff that's good for you—plenty of water, fresh fruits and vegetables, and, of course, everyone knows that anything toxic is bad for you. So a detox diet must be good for you, right? Well, not always. Like many fad or extreme diets, detox diets can have harmful effects and even work against your best weight-loss efforts.

What Is a Detox Diet?

Toxins—chemicals that can come from food or water, be used to grow or prepare food, and even come from the air that we breathe—can have harmful effects on our bodies. However, our bodies process those toxins through organs such as the liver and kidneys and eliminate them in the form of sweat, urine, and feces.

Although the beneficial effects of detox diets have not been well studied or scientifically proven, the people who believe in them think that toxins don't always leave our bodies properly during the elimination of waste. Instead, they think toxins are stored in our bodies—in our gastrointestinal and lymphatic systems. Detox diets typically are designed to have you temporarily give up certain foods that are thought to contain toxins and rid the body of all the "bad" stuff you've accumulated. Some diets involve fasting (giving up food for a couple of days) and then gradually reintroducing certain foods into the diet. Some promote colon cleansing or the intake of special teas or supplements that claim to "cleanse" your body. Many make unproven claims to prevent or cure disease, promote weight loss, and boost energy levels, yet don't warn you of the potential dangers or downsides. Detox diets that promote the use of laxatives or enemas as a way to rid the body of toxins can lead to dehydration, mineral imbalances, intestinal dependency, and other potential problems. Detox diets that promote fasting for several days can have a negative impact on metabolism. They can promote muscle breakdown to support the body's energy needs, which in turn slows metabolism or calorie-burning, making weight loss more difficult. And, certainly, the safety of following a detox diet if you have any pre-existing conditions such as heart disease and diabetes should be questioned.

How Your Body Detoxifies

The truth of the matter is that your body is designed to detoxify itself. The liver is the major organ of detoxification in your body. Every substance that is absorbed by the intestines must first pass through the liver before going on to the general circulation. Every day your liver continually disposes of toxins produced internally (from food, water, and medications consumed) and externally (from the air you breathe). Special enzymes found in the liver take potentially toxic substances and change their chemical structure so they are less harmful and can be excreted by the kidneys or in waste.

The kidneys are responsible for ensuring that the blood circulating in our body is free from harmful organisms, waste products, and excess water. Each kidney has about a million nephrons, and within these nephrons are tinier structures that help filter the blood that passes through, ultimately removing waste materials and excreting them in the urine.

The large intestine also plays an important role in detoxification. It moves waste and toxic materials out of the body by the action of peristalsis—muscle contractions that create a wave-like motion, propelling wastes so they can be excreted and removed from the body. Consuming a high-fiber diet, maintaining a healthful balance of friendly microflora in the gut with regular intake of pre- and probiotics, drinking plenty of water, and getting regular exercise all help to optimize the detoxification function of the large intestine.

Eat Right and Let Your Body Do the Rest

What you CAN do to help rid your body of toxins is to eat a well-balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and fiber, and drink plenty of water. High-fiber foods in particular will help bind potential toxins so they can be excreted. Here are five tips on how to get more fiber in your diet:

- **Replace white bread with 100% whole wheat bread.** Look for the words "whole wheat" at the top of the ingredient list and check the label for the grams of fiber. Look for a brand that provides at least 3 grams of fiber per serving.
- **Satisfy your sweet tooth with fruit.** Fresh fruit is generally low in calories but high in fiber. One cup of fresh blackberries or raspberries has about 8 grams of fiber. One medium-sized pear or apple has 4 grams.
- **Eat your veggies.** Vegetables provide an array of nutrients (vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients) that include fiber. One artichoke has 5 grams of fiber, and a potato (eaten with the skin) provides 5 grams.
- **Ladle up some legumes.** Beans and legumes provide a healthy fiber choice. Low in fat and versatile (great in soup, on salads, or as a vegetarian entrée), $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of beans and legumes provides about 6 to 8 grams of fiber.
- **Fill in the gap with supplements.** If getting adequate fiber from foods alone is a challenge, don't forget that supplemental fiber in the form of a dietary supplement or a nutritious meal-replacement beverage can help boost your daily fiber intake. Look for a fiber supplement that provides 5 to 6 grams of fiber per serving.

Remember, your body is naturally designed to keep toxins at bay. When you eat healthfully, get regular exercise, avoid smoking, get plenty of sleep, drink alcohol only in moderation, and manage your stress, your liver, kidneys, and digestive tract can do the detoxification job they're supposed to do.