



The Detox Dilemma

By H.K. Jones

Detox diets make a whole lot of promises, from flushing out poisons, melting away excess fat, and bolstering the immune system to clearing the complexion, supplying energy, and even curing diseases. The basic idea is to “detoxify” the body of harmful substance so it can perform optimally, while at the same time magically causing your body to shed unwanted pounds. Although the length and details of detox diets vary, most often they involve some version of a fast (usually water or juice) coupled with a period of severe calorie restriction and food limitation. Many programs also encourage colonic irrigation and herbal supplements to further assist the “purification” process.

For example, adherents of the popular Master Cleanse diet drink only lemon juice mixed with cayenne pepper, maple syrup, and water, as well as salt water and laxative tea for 10 days. Followers of this and other detox diets say that as their fat burns away, it takes harmful toxins along with it.

So where do all these harmful substances come from? Well, toxins, or substances that damage the structure or function of body cells and tissues, are everywhere. They’re in the foods we eat, the liquids we drink, and the air we breathe. Some come from external sources, such as alcohol, tobacco, drugs, pesticides, heavy metals, processed food, preservatives, additives, and airborne allergens, while others are created internally (free radicals and metabolic waste). There are dozens of books and hundreds of web sites that promote regimens to get rid of all these nasty toxins, and spas and health clubs alike invite dieters to detoxify themselves for good health and physical well-being.

The question is: Do detox diets work?

In a word: no. The body has its own natural and extraordinary cleansing system which works effectively to filter and eliminate waste. When healthy, the body works like a well-organized sanitation system to clean out accumulated toxins via the skin, lungs, kidney, and the hard-working liver. The liver acts as the body’s dump truck, filtering blood of impurities and producing bile, which carries pollutants out of the body, and also produces essential enzymes that help break down toxins, rendering them harmless.

The fact is, there’s no scientific evidence to support the claims made for detox diets and there’s zippo proof that these extreme regimens do anything more than lead to unpleasant and unhealthy side effects. Vitamin deficiencies, muscle breakdown due to lack of protein in the diet, and blood-sugar problems, as well as increased and not-so-pleasant bowel movements, are just some of the serious drawbacks to these restrictive plans. So despite all the hype about periodic, intensive cleansing programs, a *daily detox-friendly lifestyle* is much more effective (and a lot less dangerous) than trying to play catch up a few times a year. Follow these simple, nutrition-based decisions and you will help your body rebuild its natural strength and you’ll develop healthy habits to last a lifetime.

1. **Drink plenty of water:** Pure water is crucial in helping the liver process waste, so aim for 10-plus cups a day. Purchase a home-filtration system or drink bottled spring, artesian, or purified water. Products vary widely; check the box to see whether a filter is certified by NSF International, an independent sanitation testing organization.
2. **Cut back on booze and caffeine:** As you increase your H2O intake, decrease your alcohol and caffeine consumption. Too much alcohol increases acetaldehyde production (a toxic by-product of alcohol breakdown that destroys liver cells) and interferes with the liver’s ability to break down fats. Caffeine overstimulates the adrenals (glands that produce stress hormones, such as adrenalin), and temporarily raises blood pressure.
3. **Focus on whole foods:** Refined flour, sugar, hydrogenated fats, preservatives and artificial colors, flavors, and sweeteners—processed food is a toxic wasteland. Focus on foods that are in their whole form—the way nature made them. More good news: Whole foods contain more fiber, which helps move toxins out of your body. Kidney and black beans, soybeans, lentils, chickpeas, nuts and seeds, vegetables and fruits, and whole grains such as amaranth, barley, buckwheat, oats, and quinoa, are high-fiber sources that cleanse your body naturally.
4. **Up your intake of vegetables and fruits:** All fruits and veggies are chock full of beneficial antioxidants and phytochemicals that neutralize harmful free radicals, bolster the immune system, and reduce damage to cells.
5. **Eat organic:** Certified organic foods are free of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, growth hormones, and genetically-engineered substances, and that translates into a whole lot less toxins. Whenever possible, choose organic fruits, vegetables, meat, and dairy, as well as wild-caught fish.

About H.K. Jones: H. K. Jones is a registered dietitian, freelance writer, and nutrition professional based in Washington, D.C.

