

chicagotribune.com

Detox, a safer approach

Latest diet trend rife with pitfalls, but there is a saner approach

By Janet Helm, Special to Tribune Newspapers

February 17, 2010

The word "detox" was once the domain of drug and alcohol treatment centers. Now it's the latest in diets.

Detox diet books number in the hundreds, from "Detox Diets for Dummies" to the best-seller "The Fat Flush Plan" by detox devotee Ann Louise Gittleman, who has written several books on the purported benefits of detoxification.

On bookshelves you'll also find "21 Pounds in 21 Days: The Martha's Vineyard Diet Detox," based on a program at a Martha's Vineyard retreat, which is similar to the trendy detox programs that are popping up at spas throughout the country.

www.DrNatura.com

[Ads by Google](#)

The theory behind detox diets is that our body becomes overloaded with "toxins" from the foods we eat, including additives, preservatives, caffeine and alcohol. Advocates argue that these toxins hang around and cause all kinds of problems — from weight gain, belly bloat and cellulite to dull skin, allergies and tiredness.

Yet some experts say the entire premise is faulty.

"That's not the way the body works," said Dr. Pamela Peeke, an obesity specialist and author of "Body for Life for Women." "Don't insult your liver. It's perfectly adept at getting rid of any toxins."

Nothing we eat — or don't eat — will speed up the process, she said.

Detox diets also tout the ability to "cleanse," but Peeke said that's best accomplished by drinking a lot of water and eating plenty of whole foods rich in fiber, such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

Many of the popular detox regimens are liquid-only diets and severely restrict calories, which can lead to muscle loss, warns Peeke. Plus, she said, our liver needs adequate nourishment to do its natural job of detoxification — something that could be compromised if you're simply slurping lemon water or juice all day.

Other detox diets rely on laxatives or controversial colonics, which can be dangerously dehydrating or lead to electrolyte imbalances, said Dr. Caroline Apovian, an obesity researcher and director of the Nutrition and Weight Management Center at Boston Medical Center.

"These are starvation plans, and they're doomed to fail," she said.

Even so, the detox concept seems to be picking up steam. In the last year, there has been a 108 percent increase in foods making detox claims, according to the market research firm Mintel, which predicts detox will be a major 2010 trend in consumer packaged goods.

Lynn Dornblaser, a new products analyst at Mintel, believes the term has a renewed aura of legitimacy and is moving more mainstream.

Perhaps the definition is evolving.

Dawn Jackson Blatner, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, said "detox" has become a catchall term that could have several meanings. It could refer to detox and cleanse supplements, juice fasts and liquid diets. Or it could simply mean "clean" eating — a phase of cutting out all processed foods, sugar, caffeine or alcohol.

Blatner said that strategy can be beneficial, especially if it helps retrain your taste buds and gets you cooking, but "what you do for a few days can never make up for how you live and take care of your body the (rest) of the year."

Keri Glassman, a registered dietitian in New York, recommends a four-day "cleanse" in her new book "The O2 Diet." She said this initial 1,000-calorie phase helps her clients build confidence and lays the foundation for a new routine.

Glassman said she's against extreme approaches like the Master Cleanse (the lemonade diet popularized by Beyonce) and other liquid detox diets, but believes a short-term, structured phase that "takes out the junk" can help people get back on track — especially after a time of over-indulgence or erratic eating.

"Sometimes people need a jump-start; it can be very motivating," she said.

Registered dietitian Cynthia Sass agrees, as long as it's a "food-based cleanse" and avoids unnecessary and dangerous dietary supplements. She uses a detox-type approach with about half of the clients she works with in her New York nutrition practice.

Rather than easing into a new routine, some people need a defined moment in time to adopt a more dramatic kickoff to a healthier lifestyle, she said. "It's a way to reboot, or a chance to start over."

Sass said it can be helpful to start out with a structured and simple plan that's easy to follow and shop for food.

She said a detox-type approach can be beneficial, as long as it's done safely. There's nothing magical about it, but it can be a breakthrough for some people. For starters, it may help them change certain habits, such as getting rid of sugary sodas and drinking water instead.

Even though some of the initial pounds lost may be water weight, Sass said it can be a motivator. One of the reasons people abandon a weight-loss program is because they're not seeing any results in the beginning, she said. The initial movement on the scale can keep them going.

If you do adopt this type of approach, Peeke said it's critical to have a reasonable and sustainable plan once you're off of it. Often, she said, people have no transition, and that's when they fail.

If you try it

Tempted to follow a detox diet? Experts warn that you do it safely. Keep these points in mind:

- Eat real food instead of drinking liquids only
- Avoid laxatives and detox supplements
- Maximize your calories with natural, whole foods
- Eat consistently throughout the day, every 3-5 hours
- Drink plenty of water
- Be physically active
- Transition to a long-term approach after five days
- Aim for at least 1,000 calories a day

Copyright © 2010, [Chicago Tribune](#)