Detox diets

Detox is a popular word in the health, beauty and wellness world. It is sometimes referred to as a 'body-cleanse'. The theory is that from time to time you need to clear toxic waste from your body to stay healthy or boost wellness. In particular, you might be tempted by a detox diet after eating differently, for example at Christmas.

Some of the claims made in relation to detox diets include: rapid weight loss, improved digestion, improved hair, nails and skin, improved energy levels, boosted immune system, and banished cellulite.

- Detox diets tend to last anything from one day to around a month and may involve:
- fasting (no food or drink) for a period of time
- consuming only fruits and vegetables
- cutting out carbohydrates and dairy foods
- consuming a limited range of foods
- avoiding caffeine and alcohol
- detox solutions – a range of pills, lotions, teas or other drinks.

Exploding the myths

The whole idea of detox is nonsense. Unless you have a serious medical condition, your body is a well-developed system that has its own built-in ability to detoxify and remove waste and toxins. Your body constantly filters out, breaks down and excretes toxins and waste products such as alcohol, medications, products of digestion, dead cells, chemicals from pollution and bacteria.

Your body has numerous organs such as the skin, gut, liver and kidney, that continually 'detoxify' your body from head to toe by responding to signals to remove any waste products.

There are no pills or specific drinks, patches or lotions that can do a better or 'magic' job. If you have over-indulged on alcohol, for example, the liver works hard to break down the alcohol into products it can remove. Products like 'detox' teas work by acting as a laxative whose use is not without risk.

Being well-hydrated is a sensible strategy, but drinking too much water can be as dangerous as not drinking enough. It sounds predictable, but for the vast majority of people, a balanced diet and regular physical activity really are the best ways to maintain and maximise your health alongside other health behaviours such as not smoking and having enough good quality sleep.

People often say they feel better when detoxing and connect that feeling to what they are/are not eating. However, not smoking, drinking less alcohol, getting enough sleep, fresh air and exercise will also help you feel healthier and more energised. This is more likely to be the cause of feeling better than any 'detox' pills, lotions, teas or other drinks.

The virtues of fruit and veg

Detox diets often promote the benefits of fruits and vegetables. Of course, fruits and vegetables are an important part of a balanced diet and we should all eat a variety and at least five portions each day. Fruit and vegetables provide vitamins, minerals, antioxidants



and dietary fibre, but no single fruit or vegetable can provide a 'cure' or 'miracle' - it's the variety that counts. Fruit juice and smoothies should be limited to 150ml per day to avoid drinking too much free sugar.

Allergy to wheat and dairy?

Promoters of detox diets often claim that to 'detoxify' the body you need to exclude foods such as wheat and dairy products. The reality is that these foods provide us with important nutrients.

It is unnecessary and potentially harmful to simply cut them from the diet, especially if you are not replacing them with other foods to replace the lost nutrients.

If you think you have an allergy or intolerance to milk, wheat, or any other food then see your doctor for a proper diagnosis. They can refer you to a dietitian for safe, evidence-based advice.

The facts about fasting

Fasting, or severely restricting what you eat, limits intake of energy (calories) and can result in a lack of important nutrients needed for health and wellbeing.

Rapid weight loss can occur, but this weight loss is largely water and glycogen (the body's carbohydrate stores), rather than fat. You may feel tired and dizzy, irritable, unable to concentrate and it's likely you'll have less energy while you are following an extreme detox programme.

Furthermore, if you are fasting, your body won't have the necessary fuel available to carry out physical activity and exercise – an important aspect of general wellbeing and healthy weight management.

At the end of the programme, if you return to your old eating habits, you are likely to put back on any weight you lost.

A balanced diet

If you want to maintain optimal health then the best approach is a balanced diet, with at least five portions of vegetables and fruit each day, small portions of wholegrain carbohydrates, lean meat, fish, beans and pulses, nuts, lower-fat dairy products and alternatives, unsaturated fats and have a variety of foods in your diet.

Top tips

- Avoid excessive intakes of caffeine, alcohol and high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt foods
- Eat some fresh foods, which a lot of the detox diets suggest
- Stay hydrated with water and sugar-free drinks
- If you are looking to lose weight then consider reducing portion sizes, the types and frequency of your food and drink and don't forget to be active every day.

Detox diets are a marketing myth rather than nutritional reality. They sound like a great concept and it would be fabulous if they really delivered all that they promised.

Unfortunately, many of the claims made by detox diet promoters are exaggerated, not based on robust science and any benefit is short lived. While they may encourage some positive habits like eating more fruit and vegetables, it's best to enjoy a healthy, varied diet and active lifestyle daily, rather than following a detox diet.

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If you need to see a dietitian, visit your GP for a referral or bda.uk.com/find-a-dietitian for a private dietitian. You can check your dietitian is registered at hcpc-uk.org.

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