

Detoxification diet

"Detox" is certainly a popular buzzword in the dieting world! The article by Pierre Fava (The Sunday Times, June 5) gave the idea that we need to periodically clear the "toxic waste" from our body to stay healthy.

Some of the claims made in relation to detox diets include: improved digestion; improved energy levels; boosted immune system, etc. Detox diets can last from around one day to one month and may involve fasting for short periods, consuming only fruits and vegetables, cutting out wheat and dairy foods, and consuming a limited range of foods. This can be a dangerous venture, especially in the presence of medical conditions.

If the human body really accumulated lots of toxins, then we would feel ill. The concept of detox diets is irrational and unscientific. Although the author states that the detox programme is not a starvation diet, in actual fact it is very similar. When you starve your body of calories you will build up chemicals called ketones. These chemicals can result in nausea, dehydration, weakness, light-headedness and irritability. Further, a prolonged lack of protein causes your body to 'cannibalise' its muscles and vital organs, and compromises your immune system.

Proponents of the detox diets often promote the virtues of fruits and vegetables. Of course fruits and vegetables are an important part of a balanced diet and we should all eat at least five portions a day. They provide vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and dietary fibre, but no one fruit or vegetable can provide nutritional nirvana - it's the variety that counts.

Those promoting detox diets often claim that to 'detoxify', the body needs 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 exclude them from the diet.

For those with a true allergy to milk, wheat, or any other food, the condition should be diagnosed by a qualified medical practitioner and managed under the supervision of a registered dietitian. Mr Fava wrote that "wheat contains gluten, a protein which many people are sensitive to". This is a totally misleading and untrue statement. Statistics point out well that only 3-5% of the European population may have a true allergy [FSA 2005].

Fasting, or severely restricting food consumption, limits intake of energy and important nutrients that are needed for health and well-being. Rapid weight loss occurs when fasting or severely restricting dietary intake, but this weight loss is water, glycogen (the body's carbohydrate stores) and muscle, rather than fat. You may feel fatigued and dizzy and it's likely you'll have less energy while you are following a detox programme.

Further, if you are fasting, your body won't have the proper fuels available to carry out sustained exercise and activity - an important aspect of general well-being and healthy weight management. At the end of the programme, when you return to your old eating habits, any weight lost is likely to go back on!

The article states that "a build-up of toxins can encourage weight retention". There is no physiological relationship between toxins and weight retention.

Many points made in the article are contradictory and irrational. The most dangerous and unprofessional part of the article is that the author does not mention the side-effects this type of writing can have on people with certain medical conditions such as diabetes, kidney disorders and coronary heart disease. He mentions grapefruit as part of the product he is marketing. It is very important to pinpoint that it is a well established scientific fact that grapefruit (and even grapefruit extract) can enhance the effects of statin drugs (cholesterol-lowering drugs) which are a very common prescribable drug.

It does make sense to avoid excessive intakes of caffeine, alcohol and high-fat, high-sugar foods. However, if you want to maintain optimal health then the best approach is a balanced diet, with at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day; plenty of wholegrain cereals; lean meat, fish and alternatives and low-fat dairy products. If you are looking to lose weight then consider reducing portion sizes, and don't forget to take plenty of exercise.

Detox diets are marketing myths 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 wild and exaggerated - it's best to stick to the sound, sensible, science-based advice you will always get from impartial, qualified, registered dietitians and qualified nutritionists.

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