



Debunking Detox: Does it make sense for you?

by Patrick Bufi, ND

Have you ever done a detox or known someone who has? The idea has been around for thousands of years, used primarily by certain religious and cultural groups, but its practice in America has only recently hit the mainstream.

Is it for you? How do you sort through all the detox products on the shelf? Are there dangers? We'll cover all these questions, but first let's start with a definition.

What is it?

In simple terms, detox, short for detoxification, is a process that enhances the body's natural elimination system. It induces release of accumulated toxins from your tissues and facilitates their removal from your body.

Why do people do it?

There are all kinds of reasons that people choose to do a detox...

- After exposure to toxic substances like mercury, lead or solvents
- To eliminate toxic build up from long term use of prescription medications or other drugs and/or alcohol
- To remove the effects of living daily with pesticides, pollution, bacteria and viruses
- To purify the body for religious or other purposes
- To seek relief from low energy, headaches, joint pain and other general malaise
- To help reduce plaque buildup in the arteries
- To lose weight
- Because it's the latest health fad

We suspect the recent increase in detox popularity comes primarily from two sources...a growing concern over the harmful chemicals in our processed foods and the environment, and the desire for quick weight-loss. Some products advertise that you can lose several pounds of toxic waste with a single detox. But it's important to note that even if their claims are true, it's not true weight loss, because you're not shedding excess body fat.

How is it done?

There are many types of detox products and programs available that all work in conjunction with your body's detoxification organs – the liver, kidneys, colon, skin, and lungs. These programs include...

- Dietary regimens

- Controlled fasts
- Oral and intravenous chelation (a chemical process that binds metals and minerals until they can be removed from the body)
- Orthomolecular methods (minerals & amino acids)
- Herbal medicines

What's the best system?

One thing to keep in mind is that for most people your natural detoxification systems work very efficiently and don't need any help. However, there are times when assistance may be needed, although we advise caution.

In my opinion, most of the advertised detox systems are potentially more harmful than beneficial. It is actually possible to overburden your natural detoxification systems, and some of these detox products have very little, if any, scientific evidence or studies.

What harm?

The potential for harm results mostly from diets that don't have enough calories, which can trigger ketoacidosis (excess acid in the body). This can cause a loss of muscle mass, too rapid weight loss or too rapid detoxification, and also release stored toxins, producing side effects like headache, skin rash, or more pronounced complications.

There are also many "detox" systems that are simply unnecessary and some are promoted as weight loss treatments. Many are deficient in certain essential nutrients, very low in protein, and almost all are not worth their overstated costs.

What do we recommend?

There are times when detoxification makes sense. For example, for relief of chronic headaches, joint aches or pain, liver disease history, to improve cardiovascular health or digestive function. Detox may also be helpful for removing heavy metals, like mercury from dental fillings, or for industrial exposures, such as lead and aluminum exposure in professions like welding, or solvent and epoxy exposure often seen in boat building. These are just a few examples of how people may truly benefit from a detoxification protocol.

Still, because there are so many potentially harmful products out there, it's important to discuss your detox plans with your health-care provider to determine, first, if you need it and, secondly, to make sure you follow a program that makes sense for you. ❖