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Detox Made Safe and Simple
by Mark Hyman, MD
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With the holiday season right around the corner, there is no better time than the present to fortify our diet and cement healthy eating. Ironically, while healthy eating is our birthright, for many of us it seems like taking the plunge into eating a whole foods-based diet is the equivalent to traveling to some distant land. But it doesn't have to be such a scary or foreign experience.

In my work as a functional medicine doctor, my priority is to guide each patient through a safe, simple, realistic, and pleasurable transition into healthy eating. Because whole foods-based diets remove all the sugary, fatty, chemical-laden, artificial stuff from the diet, they sometimes get called a detox or a cleanse.

Why is detoxification important?

When our bodies become toxic it means that our natural method of ushering out metabolic waste from normal human metabolism, environmental pollution, and what has become known as the Standard American Diet (or SAD) has exceeded the threshold for what the body's innate detoxification system can tolerate. With this toxic load, every system in the human body can become affected. From our head to our toes and everything in between, toxicity makes us sick!

How do you know if you are toxic and need to properly cleanse?

Usually a constellation of complaints help to determine whether or not you are toxic and to

what extent you need to cleanse. Some examples of what might indicate a toxic system are:

- constipation
- persistent headaches, muscle aches, and muscle fatigue
- inclusion of large amounts of swordfish, tuna, shark, etc. into diet
- mercury fillings and dental amalgams
- food allergies
- stubborn weight loss
- hormonal imbalances and consistent use of hormone replacement such as “the pill” or progesterone cream

- consistent use of NSAIDs such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen
- skin abnormalities such as acne, rosacea, or eczema
- a lifetime of consuming the SAD diet

To find out if you are toxic, take a look at The UltraSimple Diet.

How long should you stay on a cleanse?

Typical cleanses that harness our body’s natural processes for filtering and removing waste tend to be gentle and can therefore be tolerated for longer periods of time than more extreme protocols. A safe cleanse is one which doesn’t make you starve yourself or take fancy pills, potions, or expensive drinks.

Safety means allowing the body to do what it wants to do naturally, with a little assistance from some guided healthy eating, appropriate supplements, and relevant lifestyle modifications. I usually have my patients do a cleanse for 7 days to 6 weeks, or even longer, depending on their particular needs. Work with a trained medical provider to help determine what length of time is right for you.

How to prepare for a cleanse?

Like we would plan for any big trip to a new destination, we need to prepare, plan, and set out some main goals for our journey. And by the way, as in all travels, it’s always a good idea to leave some room for the serendipitous excursions to occur. When handled properly, they can be the best part of a trip! So how can we plan for a safe and simple detoxification protocol?

1. Take some basic measurements before you begin to track your progress as you go through your program. For example, if weight loss is your goal, measure your waist, hips, and record your weight. If, migraines are an issue, determine the duration, intensity and frequency. Keep a journal; this will help you in more ways than one!

2. Make lists! Organize your pantry, toss out the junk, gather recipes, sketch out weekly menus, make shopping lists for healthy foods you will be eating and formulate a cooking schedule to ensure you allot time to prepare food for the week.

3. Use journaling as a way to “cleanse” your inner world and relieve yourself of mental and emotional stress.

4. Gather any supplements you need to take that have been advised for you by your medical provider.

5. Think about the kind of exercise that will best complement your end goal and plan for it in your schedule.

6. Detoxification requires you to slow down. Make sure you fit time for deep relaxation into your plan.

7. Often, unsavory side effects appear in the initial phase of a cleanse. Two side effects to look for and keep track of in your journal are:

- Constipation. Move those bowels! Drink plenty of purified water. Try warm water with

lemon first thing in the morning. Often, taking 300 mg of magnesium citrate is helpful or try an Epsom salt bath.

- Food allergies or sensitivities. These can be obvious or obscure. But chances are, as your body lets go of toxic waste, it will be easier to recognize a hidden reaction to gluten, dairy, soy or any of the other common food allergies.

Common symptoms the first few days of withdrawal from a toxic lifestyle and the SAD (Standard American Diet)

The following symptoms are very common at the beginning of the program and should dissipate within the first few days. Don't worry, these symptoms are indicative that your body is eliminating toxins and are a good sign!

- bad breath
- constipation
- achy, flu-like feeling
- fatigue
- headache
- hunger
- irritability
- itchy skin
- nausea
- offensive body odor
- sleep difficulties (too much or too little)

These symptoms can occur for a number of reasons. First, eliminating food allergies and un-junking the diet causes reactions similar to withdrawal from other addictive substances like caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, or heroin. Note: We are often most addicted to the foods we are allergic to! Getting off those allergens can cause a brief, flu-like achy syndrome that may last one to three days. Second, toxins in our digestive tract may make us feel ill if we don't eliminate them. The best way to get relief from these symptoms is to follow the recommendations below.

How to avoid withdrawal symptoms

Initially, those who consume the most caffeine, alcohol, and sugar, and those who have the most food allergies, will have the most difficulty. Symptoms usually disappear after three to four days. It is best to slowly reduce your intake of caffeine, alcohol, sugar, white flour, and over-the-counter medications (except as directed by your physician) a week or two before you start your program.

1. Drink at least six to eight glasses of filtered water daily. Stay away from plastic bottles; glass bottles are okay.
2. To prevent headaches, make sure your bowels are clean.
3. Fatigue is normal during a cleanse so allow more time for rest and sleep. To boost energy, exercise for 30 minutes a day. Walking outside in fresh air is best. Roll up those sleeves and let the sun hit you with some vitamin D!
4. Take 1,000 mg buffered vitamin C with breakfast and dinner. Take 300 mg magnesium citrate at dinner.
5. Don't wait until you are starving to eat! Balance your blood sugar by eating protein-based meals and snacks every three to four hours. Excellent sources of protein are baked or broiled fish, lean poultry, and legumes such as edamame or black beans.
6. Heat is a great resource while cleansing as it helps draw out toxins from within. Try a

sauna or a warm bath with Epsom salts for 20 minutes a few times per week.

7. While safe, these types of cleanses can still be stressful on the body and mind so remember to relax. Actively engaging your parasympathetic nervous system helps restore your energy which your body needs to replenish itself. Meditation, deep breathing, or any calming activity is good.

8. Eliminate all refined sugars, flours, caffeine, alcohol, dairy, gluten, or addictive substances. By allowing certain triggers to stay in the diet the body stays on the vicious cycle of cravings and addictive behavior. Reset your biology to eliminate all triggers.

9. Keep a journal and track your symptoms. You should feel better in three to seven days. If you do not feel well at this point, please exercise caution and check in with your doctor.

10. Tune in to your body and listen to the cues it provides. A cleanse is a great journey to learn more about understanding how to operate your very own owner's manual!

Please leave your thoughts by adding a comment below – but remember, we can't offer personal medical advice online, so be sure to limit your comments to those about taking back our health!

To your good health,
Mark Hyman, MD