

Colon Cleansing Diets by Ann Gerhardt, MD (06/2008)

Bottom Line at the Top: Cleanse your lifestyle, not your colon, to achieve health.

People have promoted colon ‘cleansing’ programs for over 60 years, long before the age of mass-marketing made them popular. The current versions, with appetizing names like Colon-Blow and Master Cleanse, sell for about \$70 per month for multi-component packages of pills, powders and dietary prohibitions.

Draconian diets and “cleansing” programs appeal to people who blame their aches and lethargy on ‘toxins’ and parasites, rather than their own diet and lifestyles. Since many people have an aversion to stool, the concept of colon cleansing is appealing as their snake-oil of choice. Some find the concept so appealing that they pay thousands of dollars to spend vacation time at spas for daily enemas, draconian diets and group exercise. All for something that could be achieved by water, exercise, stress reduction and a healthy diet.

Colon cleanse products come in two types. One type contains only non-prescription laxatives and a severely restrictive, short-term diet. The other employs a variety of components, typically fiber, herbs, probiotics (healthy bacterial supplements, see *Probiotics* article, this issue), laxative and a strict diet, promising to flush out poisons, induce weight loss, rid the body of parasites and instill vigor and health.

The “flush” part requires laxatives, usually herbal irritants to whip the colon into moving or ‘osmotic’ agents, which pull water into the colon to make soft stool. The weight loss part necessitates severely restrictive diets, usually just fruit, along with profuse water intake. The “rid the body” part uses gums and fiber to supposedly sequester the bad stuff and ‘de-toxifying’ herbs.

Positive Internet testimonials abound, but websites promoting these products aren’t going to publish complaints. One has to search a bit deeper to find comments from people who endured headache, lethargy, stomach-aches and light-headedness to lose a few pounds they quickly regained. No good study of these programs exists, mostly because a truly blinded trial (the patient and doctor don’t know which treatment is used) is impossible because of drastic visual changes in the ‘cleanse’ group’s stool.

To believe that these programs will help, one has to buy into the notion that our food is full of toxins, our body’s toxin-removal systems can’t deal with them and that cleanse” products are capable of cleaning the body through the colon. In actuality, 1) people typically die of eating too much food, not too many toxins; 2) our liver, immune system, lungs and spleen competently rid the body of most of the toxins we do consume; and 3) the colon has no capacity to secrete or expel toxins from inside our body. The only things the colon secretes are mucous, sodium, chloride and a few proteins from the immune cells in its wall. “De-tox” just isn’t in the colon’s job description (see “We Need Our Bacteria”, this issue.).

Most programs prescribe severe dietary restriction, typically only fruit or liquids, for a limited time, often 3-10 days. Of course they lose weight. If followed for only a short time, water-weight is lost without significant nutrient deficiency. Too many people carry on for too long (if a little is good, less is better), but such starvation causes vitamin deficiencies, muscle breakdown, and blood sugar irregularities. The weight is all quickly regained.

One website uses the “Supersize Me” movie to prove that we eat toxins and need a colon cleanse to get rid of them. In the movie, the previously healthy young man stuffs himself with fast food for a month and not only gains 30 pounds, but feels

sick and lethargic. That proves that eating three huge fast food meals a day is unhealthy. He needs his previous lifestyle, not a colon cleanse.

Conventional weight loss programs routinely cajole people to consume water. Without it we can't 'burn' fat. With it, people usually feel better – more energy, less muscle cramping, more clear thinking. Unfortunately people comply with the 2-quarts-of-water-per-day prescription better when it comes with a program in a box than if it's a life-long commitment.

Products that contain fiber and gums claim that they “absorb toxins and create a spongy, gelatinous mass which removes toxic waste matter stuck in the folds and crevices of the colon”. Testimonials assert that the mucoid ropes of glumpy seaweed-looking stuff, cholesterol stones and worms passing from their rectum prove that their bodies contained huge amounts of toxins and parasites.

What that mess really proves is that the product's gums and fiber congeal very well into convincing, alien muck.

Nothing like this appears during the laxative prep for a perfectly clean colonoscopy with a pristine bowel lining. Since the colon is completely incapable of pulling bad things out of our body, I can only believe that it is what is going in, the fiber, herbs and gelling product themselves, that clump to produce these colonic monsters.

We don't need psyllium husks and other fiber products to feed our healthy bacteria if we get fiber from beans, whole rains, fruit and vegetables. We don't need gums to pull toxins out of our body – the colon can't extrude toxins and, if we are having good bowel movements, any toxins already in the colon pass out by themselves.

We don't need to upset our colon's bacterial balance with laxatives if we drink water, eat fiber, exercise and don't stress. A colon emptied by laxatives loses both its healthy and pathogenic bacteria and there is no guarantee that the healthy ones will preferentially return.

Every product contains some type of laxative, typically cascara, aloe vera, senna, rhubarb and/or slippery elm. Cascara sagrada, promoted as a “very mild and effective, natural, herbal laxative” is in fact a strong laxative. Senna contains compounds called hydroxyanthracene glycosides, also potent laxatives. Naturalists claim that cascara and senna cause no dependency, and that they condition bowel muscles to function better when the laxative is discontinued. Wrong. The bowel becomes just as dependent on cascara and senna as it does on prescription laxatives.

Laxatives and liquid diets don't make the colon healthy. In fact, they accomplish the opposite. The colon has an extensive immune system that helps our whole body and depends on our healthy, symbiotic bacteria. That function is lost by starving the bacteria with a liquid diet and washing them away with a laxative flush.

After this “therapy”, the colon takes a while to function again. The colon somehow needs to re-acquire normal bacteria and renew its lining. Until that happens, there may be nausea, loose stools and bloating. The programs that include probiotics at least address this need by trying to replace healthy bacteria.

The best way to de-tox is to not tox in the first place. Clean out the junk food and eat a variety of all the food groups, including organic vegetables, fruit and whole grains. Consume at least two quarts of water a day, to give the body's usual “cleansing” mechanisms a chance to work.