

DE TO X!

BY SHANNON BUSTA

"Detox" — that buzzword that makes us feel guilty about our all-too-polluted lives — has dominated both mainstream and alternative health media in recent years.

Unable to resist the draw of flashy ads promising "quick" weight loss and increased energy through "simple" detoxification or cleansing, I decided to look into the matter.

Unfortunately, as with many things in life, the things worth doing are never easy.

Nevertheless, curious to find out whether detoxing was all the media had made it out to be, I embarked on a mission to educate myself about the process.

The Roman poet Virgil once wrote, "the greatest wealth is health." While we may not spend time contemplating the philosophical worth of our well-being on a daily basis, taking a proactive approach today can help ensure better health tomorrow. And so, with Virgil's wise words in mind, I dedicated myself to a two-week detox.

Over tea one rainy afternoon, Baljit Kaur Khamba Grewal, a naturopathic doctor, shared her wisdom on the topic of detoxing with me. Descended from a long line of healers, Grewal leads detox classes every spring and fall at the START (Stress, Trauma, Anxiety, Rehabilitation, Treatment) clinic in Toronto. She is a strong advocate of detoxing for better health and believes it is something most people should consider for their long-term health. "Detoxing can reduce the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and depression" she says.

According to the American Heart Association, more women die each year from heart disease than men. Meaning, as women, every step we take to ensure the health of our heart is a worthwhile one.

Detoxing is a proactive wellness approach that involves ridding the body of toxins that build up in our cells over time. By limiting the type of food we consume, we allow our cells to release toxins that slow down our bodily systems and negatively impact us in both the short- and long-term.

Once you have decided to detox, it is important to commit to your plan fully. This involves sharing your choice with those close to you and purging your kitchen of all harmful foods.

Sharing the news with my friends and family meant they didn't question my sanity when the lover of carbohydrates and coffee that they once knew emptied her kitchen of all processed and packaged foods.

"The key to detoxification, when it comes to food, is to prepare," Grewal tells me. "Detoxify your kitchen...and prepare at home. Have things divided up and ready to eat; make it easy on yourself."

As information becomes more accessible, it becomes easier for us to take our health into our own hands. Homeopathic doctor Maria Ringo has seen a shift in the way many people approach their health. “There is an awareness on the part of consumers,” she says. “They realize they can do something to help themselves, instead of sitting and waiting for a doctor to tell them what to do. It is an empowering situation.”

I certainly felt empowered. I would not consider myself an “unhealthy person” but I knew I was not at my best. I was jogging three or four times a week, but that was to compensate for the two or three nights of dinners out and social drinking I was also indulging in. To make things worse, I was consuming far too much caffeine and not nearly enough water. My skin looked tired and splotchy, and my energy levels were not that of a healthy, active young female. The reality of it was that I felt like I wasn’t in control of my health.

According to Grewal and Ringo, signs that you could benefit from detoxing include: bloating or weight gain, acne, sluggishness, digestive problems, depression and anxiety.

Many who have completed a detox speak of energy and mood increases. This can be attributed to a normalizing of blood sugar levels, says Grewal. “When you detoxify and eat whole fresh foods, your blood sugar levels out, which increases your mood.”

My first day of detoxing began with two glasses of water, one with the juice of half a lemon mixed in. This helps to flush toxins and trigger your digestive system. While caffeine is not advised while detoxing, Grewal permits green tea, which has roughly 70 per cent less caffeine than coffee.

Both Grewal and Ringo encourage the consumption of whole foods that are rich in nutrients and easy to digest.

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I had stocked my kitchen with fresh fruits and vegetables, chicken, fish, herbal teas and whole grains.

Ringo advised the consumption of organic brown rice, apples, oats, avocados and plain organic yogurt and Grewal encouraged the consumption of olive oil, garlic and dark, leafy greens.

Ringo also stressed the importance of a reduced caloric intake. “We eat a pretty heavy diet in our culture... when you take the pressure off of your digestive system, your body can direct energy elsewhere.”

As day one moved along, I felt strong and determined to stick to my detox. The most obvious difference I noticed was a lack of energy, which I attributed to a lack of Starbucks coffee.

Types of Detoxes/Cleanses

Assisted Detox

An assisted detox involves working with an expert, such as a nutritionist, naturopath or homeopath to identify the specific type of detoxing your body needs. The individual assisting you will then design a personalized detox plan that is specific to your individual needs.

Benefits: the guidance and encouragement will increase your chances of success.

Negatives: most effective when carried out over multiple weeks, meaning it could be an entire month before you can enjoy a glass of wine or cup of coffee.

The Master Cleanse/ The Lemonade Diet

The Master Cleanse cleans out your digestive track and helps you detox quickly. During the Master Cleanse you consume no food, caffeine or alcohol. You are only permitted herbal tea and a lemonade mix made from combining fresh lemon juice, cayenne pepper and real maple syrup with warm water. You are also encouraged to drink a laxative tea nightly. Generally the Master Cleanse lasts three to 12 days.

Benefits: weight loss, clearer skin, better digestion, increased energy and improved mood.

Negatives: you will likely want to stay close to home during this cleanse as being near a bathroom is crucial.

Juice Fast

Only freshly made vegetable and fruit juices are consumed. No solid food, caffeine or alcohol. Typically, juice fasts only last one-to-three days.

Benefits: weight loss, clearer skin, better digestion, increased energy and improved mood.

Negatives: no solid food is permitted.

By the third day and after several close calls (my city is rich in coffee shops), I began feeling lighter, more energetic and less stressed.

One of the strangest changes in these first days was a relaxing of my jaw; for years I had clenched and grinded my teeth while writing, likely induced by stress.

“Your brain is starving essentially, and if your brain is starving, it leads to anxiety and depression,” Grewal tells me. “If you take the time to detox your body and reintroduce all of the vitamins and minerals, everything that your body needs, naturally your mood will improve.”

My mood was improving and my teeth were benefiting because of it.

As the days carried on, my fondness for the Starbucks coffees that once fueled my life faded away and I began enjoying herbal teas. By the second week, my mornings had become less of a struggle, and I was able to get through the day with a single cup of green tea. Much to my surprise, detoxing was not as hard as I thought it would be.

Ringo stressed that detoxing should be thought of as a gentle elimination diet. A common mistake people make is to assume that “detoxing” is the same as “cleansing.”

Cleansing is a more extreme, and often short-term means through which to clear your digestive system of toxins. Cleanses rarely include food, and typically require those partaking in them to remain close to a washroom.

Having done a few cleanses myself, I found the gentle, more flexible detoxing route to be far more practical for someone leading a high-energy life.

I continued to jog throughout, as both practitioners highly encourage exercise while detoxing. Grewal tells me that your skin is responsible for emitting a huge amount of toxins from your body through sweat, thus increased sweating is advised.

One of the most enjoyable side effects of detoxing was the weight loss. Grewal stresses, however, that those who are just looking to lose pounds should look elsewhere, as detoxing is “a total wellness choice; weight loss is merely a side effect.”

After two weeks of detoxing, I experienced a weight loss of six pounds. While this was a wonderful side effect, I was far more pleased with my increased mood and energy levels. My friends found I was more pleasant to be around and my work benefited from my calmer state of mind.

Rejoining the world of processed food and Starbucks coffee was, to say the least, enjoyable, but I now find myself consuming far more water and vegetables than I have in years.

And while skeptics point out there is little scientific evidence to support the claims that detoxing provides tangible benefits, as Grewal told me, “the proof is in the pudding.”

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