

San Francisco Chronicle

Return of detox diet worries doctors

Enthusiasts say it gives the body a chance to purge built-up toxins.

By ERIN ALLDAY

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

For 14 excruciating days, Amy Blumenthal was a paragon of willpower.

By night, the 38-year-old was a waitress, serving burgers and fries and other dinner treats at a San Francisco restaurant.

By day — or actually, pretty much around the clock — she was eating nothing.

"Nobody at work could believe I was doing it. I couldn't believe I was doing it," Blumenthal said of her two-week fast, which ended after she had dropped 15 pounds and felt confident she had purged her body of toxins she believes had been building up in her liver and kidneys and other organs.

Blumenthal was on the "Master Cleanse," a food detox program and trendy diet that is especially popular among people in their 20s and 30s who want to find out what it's like to give up the guilty pleasures, or pretty much all pleasure, in their eating lives.

Traditional doctors tend to frown on detox diets, and the Master Cleanse in particular. The body does just fine clearing out toxins on its own, they say, and while people aren't going to starve to death on the diets, they'll be missing key nutrients the body needs, like calcium and iron.

"We don't need to do this. Ultimately, our body detoxifies what it needs to. Our lungs, our livers, our kidneys — they're doing the job." said Nicole Britvan, a registered dietitian with Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco.

Even as a weight-loss plan, detox is not all that effective, Britvan said.

People might lose weight right away, but it will mostly be water, and after a few days, the body's metabolism will slow and the pounds won't drop as easily.

Plus, once they're off the diet, people on detox tend to go overboard when they start eating again and gain the weight back fairly quickly. They end up on another yo-yo diet, she said.

But fans swear by the results of detox, and not just the drop in body mass.

"I was amazed at how much energy I had," Blumenthal said. "I could feel it working."

Coleen Murphy, a naturopathic doctor who runs a three-week detox program, said she doesn't recommend her patients use detox to lose weight. But she said fasting diets can help people change their habits and pick up healthier lifestyles.

"I don't want my patients to starve themselves or do anything unhealthy," Murphy said. "But we're not meant to gorge ourselves. That's the fascinating thing when you're on this detox. You're energetic; you feel great. You're just like, 'Wow, I don't need that much food.' You really become aware of your eating habits."

Making a comeback

Detox diets were especially popular in the '60s, and they're going through a resurgence now. Multiple Web sites and Internet forums are devoted to the Master Cleanse, invented 60 years ago by nutrition guru Stanley Burroughs, who wrote a book on the topic called "The Master Cleanser" in 1976.

Detox is based on the idea that people regularly consume toxins — pesticides, mercury and food additives, for example — in their daily diet. When enough of these toxins build up, they can overwhelm the body's natural detox system, causing fatigue, headaches and allergy-like symptoms, according to diet proponents. Cutting off all or most foods gives the body a chance to recover and remove these toxins.

The diets vary, and not all of them involve fasting. What they have in common is for anywhere from a week to a month, and sometimes longer, dieters give up all of the processed, fatty, unhealthy foods that fill up most of our diets. They also cut out alcohol, caffeine and cigarettes.

Some detox diets end there — dieters subsist on vegetables, fruits, whole

grains and other healthy morsels. Murphy's program allows dieters to eat fruits and vegetables, beans for protein and simple broths. Some dieters make up their own plans and decide to give up only certain kinds of foods, such as dairy products or deep-fried foods.

The Master Cleanse is among the most extreme. For one to two weeks, dieters are allowed tea at night and a salt flush in the morning, and throughout the day they drink only a watery concoction they call lemonade — it's water, lemon juice, maple syrup and cayenne pepper.

They'll typically drink about 60 ounces a day, and that's all they get.

"The first time I did the cleanse, I had no trouble. The second time, for whatever reason, was just such a grind. I just sort of felt more acutely hungry and like I didn't have enough energy to carry me through the day," said Sean Aquino, a 29-year-old Web designer in San Francisco.

Pitfalls

Britvan said she's had patients ask about detox diets, which she never recommends. They're not necessarily unsafe, although they're far from nutritious, and they're a terrible way to lose weight, she said.

There are the food cravings, of course, which aren't improved by also giving up smoking, caffeine and alcohol.

There's also the social isolation — dieters don't want to risk temptation, so going out to dinner with friends is out of the question, along with lunch with co-workers or Friday night trips to the bar.

The key to knowing when it's time to quit the Master Cleanse, proponents say, is your tongue. During detox, a white film will develop on the tongue, and when it's pink and healthy again, the toxins are supposedly gone.

That's when dieters are allowed juice and, after a day or two, soup. But after 14 days on tea and lemon water, Blumenthal had had enough.

"The day I broke my fast, someone at work brought in this amazing homemade breaded cutlet and amazing mashed potatoes. By 9 o'clock, my finger was in the mashed potatoes and I was eating baby bites of the chicken," she said. "The next day, I had some eggs and guacamole. I think I hit up some salsa. Pretty much I was back to eating right away."