

Should you detox?

Fruit diets do not lead to fat-loss. Instead, they rob your body of essential nutrients — Photolibrary

Not if starving or following a celebrity diet is your idea of flushing out toxins and losing weight. Kareena N Gianani finds the risks involved in this fancy but futile exercise



Detox diets echo everyone's dream — a cellulite-free body, glowing skin, fast weight-loss and energy-levels never experienced before. And, of course, there are reed thin celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow and curvaceous Beyonce Knowles who swear by diet regimes that "flush out dreadful toxins from the body" and gain an enviable figure in the bargain. (Knowles attributes hers to her water-cayenne pepper-maple syrup diet called Master Cleanse — the most-searched recipe on Google in 2007 according to the Los Angeles Times).

While spas, gyms and some weight-loss clinics cannot stop raving about detox programmes like Fruit Flush (only fruit diet) and sometimes even an only-water diet, most nutritionists and specialists have their eyebrows raised at their principles and benefits.

Lack of medical research and studies to show whether our bodies really benefit from a detox diet, says Dr Alpana Shukla, consultant endocrinologist at Bombay Hospital, is reason enough to rubbish all tall claims. She maintains the term, 'detox', itself, is trite — not to mention inappropriate. "Detox diets are sold under the pretext of strengthening your system from pollution, stress and the processed food and alcohol. But the real reason why people turn to them is for, instant weight-loss. As for actual detoxification, healthy kidneys, liver, lungs and skin do an excellent job of it anyway. If you eat healthy, you will never need this drastic quick-fix." In most cases, adds Dr Shukla, the lost weight is regained in no time — and worse, with added kilos.

Most fancy detox diets cut out dairy products, wheat, all fats, carbohydrates and, in many cases, even proteins. Each has its own formula — some call for more spices, fruit juices and others en-

courage only vegetable broth. Monica Thadani, 37, went on a similar diet three years ago, after the birth of her first child. Unaware that the idea would backfire, she read detox diets online and went ahead with the one that promised weight-loss within weeks. "I stopped having milk, fats and eventually, fruits. The website claimed that lemon juice would 'melt the fat away' and I spent a few days drinking only that." After two years, much to her doctor's surprise, Thadani ended up with multiple hair-line fractures in her rib-cage and hip. Dr Shukla, who treated Thadani, says it isn't only calcium deficiency that a patient needs to be wary of. Don't be surprised if you experience a tingling or numbing sensation of the nerves after a diet — it may be due to Vitamin B12 deficiency. Dieticians advise against detox diets that in-

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sist on starvation. The only results are irregular bowel movements, a sluggish metabolism and weight gain when the diet is discontinued. Dr Jyoti Lalwani, a nutritionist, says that weakness which settles in after a harsh detox diet can sometimes be irreversible. "A dieter must know this weight-loss is not fat-loss — of course, you will initially shed pounds, but it is first water retention and gradually, your muscle that is breaking down. There are diets that extol the virtues of coconut water but they seldom specify that it can lead to kidney problems, too." Experts also slam diets

that don't involve salt intake. Our body doesn't make sodium; no wonder, they say, dieters may experience nausea, dizziness and bad vision.

The verdict: Not everyone may need a thorough detoxification of the system or lose weight this way. Dr Harish Ahuja, a toxicologist at Jaslok Hospital, believes only those with problems like a skin allergy to metals, severe constipation or oedema need a thorough detoxification and diet change. "Detox diets are marketed as a mass need — they are not. Most of us are better off without these confusing messages," he says.

Nutritionists like Naini Setalvad admit they do encourage their clients to detox (in her words, make changes in their diet without fasting to help the system relax), only after a thorough vitamin check-up. "I advise against bad fats and to start by eating fruits and then raw vegetables, sprouts, natural fats like nuts. In many cases, my patients' energy levels have risen. Our body has a metabolic system in place but do most people maintain it? It is that population that needs detox."

In name of detoxification, colonic irrigation (low-pressure injection of water into the colon) is largely propagated by naturopaths. However, Summaiya Azmi, dietician at the Asian Heart Institute has a word of caution. "The colon is a part of the intestine and doesn't need external cleansing at all. What's more, the procedure is too aggressive and can damage the intestine." For every claim made by detox diets, Azmi believes there is a natural way out — for instance, if your intestine concerns you, simply eat curd. It contains all the good bacteria your colon needs. "Detox diets can turn ugly — the fixation with starvation leads to acidity and one may develop ulcers, too. If one sticks to a balanced diet, there's little else the body needs to function well."