

New York – The Fat Flush Plan. The Master Cleanse. Those are among the detoxification programmes thousands of Americans regularly embark on.

They “detox” in an effort to rid the gastrointestinal system of unsavoury substances that proponents believe build up and can cause allergies, exhaustion and certain cancers.

The benefits of the detox regimens have been espoused by celebrities like Beyoncé Knowles. She claimed to have lost 9kg before the movie *Dreamgirls* on the Master Cleanse, a concoction of lemon juice, cayenne pepper, maple syrup and water.

But many Western doctors question the legitimacy of the regimens and their claims of promoting good health. They believe detoxification does little to no good, and is possibly harmful.

“It is the opinion of mainstream and state-of-the-art medicine and physiology that these claims are not only ludicrous but also tantamount to fraud,” says Dr Peter Pressman, an internist with the Naval Hospital in Jacksonville, Florida. “The contents of what ends up being consumed during a ‘detox’ are essentially stimulants, laxatives and diuretics.”

Such opinions have done little to deter the growing interest in the practice.

Detoxification is enormously popular, according to Spins, a market research and consulting firm that caters to the natural and organic products industry. Sales of herbal formulas for cleansing, detoxification and organ support among natural food retailers were more than US\$27 million (\$\$40 million) from Dec 2, 2007, to Nov 29 last year.

A survey by Mintel International, a research firm, found that 54 food and drink products were launched last year with the word “detox” in their descriptions – up from 15 in 2003.

The thinking goes that by avoiding certain foods, adding nutritional and herbal supplements and cleansing your innards, you can cure the body of all sorts of evils.

“Western medicine is treating the symptoms instead of addressing the root cause,” says Mr Edward F. Group III, a naturopath with theholisticoption.com, an online resource for the alternative wellness community.

“We basically have a world that’s constipated. It’s like if you change your oil in your car but never change the oil filter. Ultimately it gets so full of sludge, the engine’s going to break down.”

The goal of detoxification is to remove that sludge.

Indeed, most regimens typically involve fasting, food restriction, nutritional supplements or a combination thereof.

Most regimens eliminate caffeine, alcohol and nicotine; some limit meat and solid foods and rely on unusual juice blends (cayenne pepper and lemon, for instance), all in an effort to rid the gastrointestinal sys-

Can detox make you look like this?

With a detox concoction of lemon juice, cayenne pepper, maple syrup and water, Beyoncé said she lost 9kg.



tem of pesticides, dioxins, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and food additives.

Because many holistic doctors believe that one’s bowels should be irrigated as much as four times a day, some detoxers rely on colonics, enemas and herbal laxatives to move things along. Others rely on liquid fasts, herbal supplements and colonics.

According to an expert, almost all of the roughly 15,000 day and destination spas in the United States offer some kind of detoxifying treatment.

For instance, Le Jardin Day Spa near Philadelphia has a 30-minute “foot detox”, which involves placing feet in a saltwater bath; it can, the spa claims, energise red blood cells and circulation, aid kidney and liver function and boost the immune system.

As the number of products and treatments grows, critics like Dr Pressman continue to emphasise what they say is a lack of scientific evidence that detoxification actually works.

He says: “I advise patients that these detox programmes amount to a large quantity of excrement, both literally and figuratively.”

Dr Frank Lipman, a specialist in integrative medicine in New York, puts it more delicately: “People are selling a product. There’s a difference between selling a product and practising good medicine.”

While he says footbaths are “nonsense” and calls skin scrubs “third-level detox”, he does think there is a place for chelation therapy (a way of removing heavy metals from the body, either intravenously or

through oral supplements) and colonics (a manner of irrigating the bowels), mainly for patients with chronic digestive problems.

He says he is also concerned about exposure to toxins, adding that a typical home has more than 1,000 of them, including cleaning chemicals, formaldehydes and paint.

Whatever critics say, many people

swear by the programmes. Ms Denise Whitney, 37, a registered nurse and mother of three, did the Master Cleanse over a seven-day period, plus six days of pre- and post-cleanse, which included consuming copious amounts of organic juice, fruit and vegetables.

“With all the fast food, preservatives and chemicals in our food, it seems impossible that our bodies are not loaded with toxins,” she said, adding that she plans to repeat it in the next few months. “I had more energy during this cleanse than I can ever remember having.”

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