

It's a fact — we're becoming increasingly obsessed with our bodies. We'll go to great lengths to make them fitter, firmer and healthier. Take, for example, the increasingly popular detoxification or "detox" diet. Ann Chang, dietitian at Alexandra Hospital, explains, "Many believe that detoxification is necessary to treat stress, sedentary lifestyles, and over-consumption of foods and non-food substances. The belief is that bodies can be overloaded with toxins from foods and substances such as caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and food additives. These are believed to stay in our gastrointestinal systems, lungs and skin, especially during periods of stress or dehydration. Advocates of detoxing believe that toxins can only be removed via special diets, supplements, exercise and relaxation."

SPRING-CLEAN YOUR BODY

"Detox diets vary from eating just fruits to raw vegetables or uncooked foods only or sometimes just fluids or even fasting," says consultant nutritionist Julie Howden. It can also involve consuming a special formula in replacement of meals.

While many health professionals are sceptical about the long-term advantages of detox diets, others advocate them. Founder of the Neera

Detox Programme (which consists of replacing meals with a maple-and-palm-syrup mixture), Dr Andreas Beyer explains, "With gradual toxin build-up, the immune system slows down and proper absorption of nutrients is hindered. When toxins are not removed, they flow to the blood and cells. We're only as healthy as our cells." Detoxification, thus, allows the body to rest from the digestive processes.

ARE THERE REAL BENEFITS?

Howden believes that detox diets offer no long-term boon. "Essentially, they are just low in calories so people lose weight in the short term. Most of the weight-loss comes from water, which is quickly replaced once back on the normal diet. As for claims that they remove impurities, this flies in the face of science. The body is well-equipped to fully digest food, absorb nutrients and remove waste materials." Chang believes that the pluses of a detox diet are no different from a healthy diet. "Anyone who keeps a low-fat, high-fibre diet would feel healthier."

On the contrary, Dr Beyer says that the benefits are plentiful. "Noticeable results can be felt and seen. Hair becomes silkier, and eyes and skin become clearer. There will be a higher level of energy, vitality and

mental clarity after the detox."

But experts agree that there can be some benefits. Chang says, "Diets that are high in fruits and vegetables will be high in fibre and antioxidants, and low in fat. These can help to maintain colon health and prevent constipation, and have some cholesterol-lowering and weight-loss benefits. Overall, the person will feel healthier because he/she is conscious of the diet." She adds that it can serve as a good chance to make positive changes.

But Chang also warns, "There is no substantiated evidence to support the extreme varieties like long-term fasting and colon irrigation. Eating healthily is still the gold standard."

POSSIBLE REPERCUSSIONS

Says Howden, "In the short term, detox diets probably do no harm as most of them are only meant for a few days and should not last longer than three days as severe calorie restriction will cause the break-down of lean muscle to meet energy needs. This can lead to bad breath, constipation and a lower metabolic rate, making it harder to maintain or lose weight. Also, as the diets are not balanced, the body can miss out on essential vitamins and minerals." She adds that they can be used for a few days to kick-start a



GOING INTO DETOX

Health aid or passing fad? Lorraine Robert uncovers the truths about detox diets and finds out if they're an absolute necessity for a healthier you.

weight-loss diet, after which a balanced plan should be followed.

Detox diets are deemed a no-no for pregnant women or teenagers who need good nutrition. Chang adds, "Many of the supplements used in detox diets can be laxatives, causing dehydration, mineral imbalances and digestive problems. Some may become 'addicted' to a diet of short-term fasting and bingeing, which may lead to

serious eating disorders."

Although Dr Beyer believes that anyone of average health can try it, he advises, "You need to consult a physician before starting a fast. Those suffering from debilitating illnesses should avoid it unless recommended by their doctors." He says that there are no serious side effects to his programme except for maybe dizziness, nausea or headaches as toxins are released.

TAKE HEED

Should you decide to try a detox diet, practise caution. Howden advises to be wary of claims that are too good to be true and that aren't supported by science. "One should ask for academic qualifications before making a judgement or listening to advice."

"I WENT INTO DETOX"

We put our chief sub editor Claudette Peralta on five days of the Neera Detox Programme. At the heart of it is the Madal Bal Natural Tree Syrup — a blend of palm and maple syrup. This is mixed with fresh lemon juice and cayenne pepper. The programme involves drinking between six and 12 glasses of the drink daily, plus lots of water and other liquids. To help with bowel elimination, there's Senna tea. People new to the programme are advised to do it over three to five days, otherwise it can go up to 10 days.

DETOX DIARY:

Day 1: The first two glasses of the drink made my usual morning hunger pangs disappear. Lunchtime was hard — my stomach churned more from force of habit rather than hunger. I'm also fighting a major headache and am feeling nauseous. But by evening, I'm quite energetic.

Day 2: I actually feel refreshed. Lunchtime was tough again though. I crave food, but I'm not hungry.

Day 3: I am conscious of the movement in my stomach and digestive system. Still no hunger pangs, and my energy level is good. I even make it to the gym for an hour of light workout and feel even better.

Day 4: Today was a bit rough. I felt more hunger pangs than before. I crave food, but staved off the yearnings by increasing my intake of the drink. It was tough turning down Friday dinner and drinks. And I actually went to the toilet twice today.

Day 5: It's the first time I'm going out and temptations abound! I find myself rushing home to fuel up on the drink. Today's the last day of my fast, although I feel like I could go on for a couple more days.

Post mortem: I have not lost a lot of weight, but my clothes are looser and sit flat against my body. The important thing is I feel energised and free from evil foods. I'm more in tune with my body; I have a keener sense of taste and a better appreciation for food. The work now is keeping a healthy eating regime.

■ For more information on the programme, call: 6866 3298 or surf to the website: www.innerbalanceasia.com