



Detox diets: More myth than magic

BY DR TAN SUE YEE

AFTER days of festive feasting, be it Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Kaamatan, Gawai or Christmas, you might hear someone say, “I’ve eaten so much, I need to go on a detox diet!” Why? To “cleanse and reset” the body. But do detox diets really work?

Detox, short for detoxification, is a buzzword used to describe the removal of toxins from the body, usually after a period of heavy or unhealthy eating. In a recent six-episode Netflix drama series, *Apple Cider Vinegar*, the detox diet was presented as juicing and coffee enemas – arguably one of the more popular versions. In this series, the regimen was used to treat unfavourable health conditions. However, it is important to note that ‘detox’ in a medical context is very different; it refers to the actual, supervised removal of harmful substances (alcohol, drugs or poisons) in hospital or clinic settings.

Historically and traditionally, detox diets have been linked to religious and cultural practices of cleansing and rejuvenation. Today, they are popularised by social media trends and celebrity influences, as well as by growing concerns about living in an increasingly polluted environment.

Detox diets are short-term eating plans (typically less than two weeks) that claim to rid the body of toxins and thus improve health. They may involve multiple approaches, including, but not limited to, severe caloric restriction, juice fasts, or food modifications, often combined with selected supplements, laxatives or

diuretics. People generally experience weight loss after these regimens, which is mainly due to reduced calorie intake, as well as water loss and faecal elimination (when laxatives are used).

Aside from short-term weight loss, there is currently little scientific evidence supporting the effectiveness and safety of detox diets. The British Dietetic Association and many health experts point out that existing studies on commercial detox diets are limited, small-scale and methodologically flawed. Moreover, most detox programmes fail to explain what toxins are supposedly being removed and how the process works.

Research has also noted that most detox diets are ‘do-it-yourself’ regimens – usually liquid-based, low-calorie and nutrient-poor. A recent Northwestern University study found that a three-day juice diet can disrupt the balance of good bacteria in the mouth and gut, potentially affecting digestion and immunity. Restrictive practices like these can easily expose one to nutrient deficiencies, electrolyte

imbalances, dehydration, muscle loss and fatigue. In addition, the use of unregulated supplements or herbal products, if any, may carry potential health risks. Furthermore, research has shown that extreme restrictions can raise stress hormones such as cortisol. This not only increases appetite but also triggers the likelihood of rebound weight gain, undoing the benefits of the diet.

In my first job as a nutritionist at a wellness centre, I saw many clients go through detox programmes. These involved juice diets paired with supplements such as omega-3 fatty acids, fibre and probiotics. Before and after the programme, clients were encouraged to eat unprocessed foods, fruits and vegetables, wholegrains and plain water. Following this ‘journey’, many reported weight loss, improved skin conditions, increased energy levels and better bowel movements. In reality, these benefits were more likely the result of healthier eating habits and hydration than of the detox itself. Nutritional science shows that individuals with significant nutrient deficiencies tend to experience the most tremendous health improvements from dietary interventions as their bodies restore essential functions.

Back then, I also noticed how challenging it was for most clients to stay on track. Some confessed to ‘cheating’ during the programme – sneaking a bite of chocolate or having a mouthful of rice because the restrictions were difficult to maintain. This highlights the reality that detox diets are often unsustainable. Restrictions can easily lead to boredom and cravings, then eventually relapse.

The truth is, our body is already equipped with powerful systems to remove toxins naturally. Our liver, kidneys and gastrointestinal tract work efficiently around the clock to filter, metabolise and eliminate waste. Therefore, there is really no need for special diets to enhance these processes. What matters most is how we care for these existing detox systems and support them with sustainable habits, such as eating a balanced, moderate and varied diet, practising mindful eating and making wise food choices, without unnecessary risks.

For those who are still drawn to or insist on going for a detox diet, it is crucial to do so under the guidance of qualified health professionals. Some may wish to use a detox diet as an initial step or motivational kick-start towards healthier living, but be mindful that detox diets aren’t meant for long-term use, as they can easily lead to nutrient deficiencies if unsupervised.

The bottom line is, detox diets are more of a nay than a yay – just as depicted in the earlier-mentioned series *Apple Cider Vinegar*. Rather than chasing quick fixes, we should focus on maintaining our natural detoxification systems by regularly eating healthily, exercising (which helps us detox through sweating), staying well hydrated, getting quality rest and sleep, and avoiding harmful habits such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. In essence, the best detox is the daily practice of healthy, sustainable habits that keep our bodies functioning at their best for as long as possible. Finally, always seek accurate information about nutrition and healthy eating from a registered nutritionist to empower yourself in making informed, healthy choices every day.

Dr Tan Sue Yee is a Council Member of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, a nutrition consultant, and currently serves as the Manager of Scientific Programs for the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) SEA Region.

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