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Spring has sprung. For many, it is a season of new beginnings. From a healthy living perspective, part of my personal re-setting for the year includes a cleanse.

Historically, cleansing has been associated with fasting, often at the spring and autumn equinoxes, a practice observed in many cultures and traditions over the course of history. In Buddhism, fasting may be used as a means of “invigorating” one’s practice (a new beginning of sorts), and indeed, the ending of a period of fasting marked the Buddha’s spiritual awakening (the ultimate new beginning).

From a health perspective, Paracelsus, considered a father of Western medicine, considered fasting “the greatest remedy”.

Cleansing in the 21st Century

Although many still adhere to cleansing the Paracelsus way, science does not necessarily support absolute abstinence from nutrients as the most effective means of removing toxins from the body.

The body processes toxins (and naturally occurring metabolic wastes) primarily via the liver and lymphatic tissues in the gut. The process is described as metabolic detoxification, filtering toxins from

the blood for ultimate removal via either urine or bowel movements (significantly smaller amounts of waste are removed via the lungs in respiration and the skin via perspiration).

For the liver and gut to carry out this important activity, they require energy (i.e. calories) and the nutrients (e.g., amino acids, vitamin C, B-vitamins, magnesium, copper, zinc and others) involved in these metabolic processes.

Cleansing is a complex undertaking that involves managing several physiological processes:

- » Toxins stored in the body (in body fat) must be mobilized into the blood for “filtering”
- » The liver and gut must “filter” toxins from the blood and deliver them to the bowels and into the urine
- » The bowels must be functioning efficiently in order for “filtered” toxins to be excreted from the body

It makes sense to minimize exposure to dietary and other toxins during a cleanse to minimize a “two steps forward, one step back” scenario.

First, do no harm!

Although cleansing is a generally safe activity, and can be of benefit for virtually any person, for some it should only be undertaken under the care of a healthcare professional (in my arguably biased opinion, naturopathic doctors are the most qualified healthcare professionals for this, having training in biochemistry and pathology, as well as clinical nutrition).

Persons who should *not* participate in cleansing programs without professional supervision include those:

- » Having a health history of disordered eating (e.g. anorexia nervosa)
- » Using prescription medications described as having a “narrow therapeutic index” (cleansing will increase the efficiency of drug metabolism, potentially decreasing drug effectiveness)
- » Having diabetes mellitus (dietary changes and fasting affect blood sugar levels)
- » Being pregnant (mobilization of stored toxins from fat tissues temporarily increases levels of circulating toxins, which in turn, increase an unborn child’s toxin exposure)
- » Having constipation (bowel movements are the mechanism by which a majority of toxins are ultimately removed from the body – no bowel movements means “toxin backup”)

Let’s get started.

These are simple things anyone can do to improve soundness of body, mentally and emotionally re-set for a productive coming season, and for those new to the practice, perhaps experience a level of physical wellness previously not achieved.

Filtering of toxins from the blood is a two-step process, involving extraction of toxins from the blood, followed by binding of those toxins to amino acids so they can be “held” in the blood until they are transferred to the urine or into bowel movements for final removal from the body.

Certain foods are particularly rich in nutrients that support these biochemical processes.

Non-starchy (i.e. “non-potato”) vegetables, fruit, and whole grains supply the liver and gut with excellent sources of many of the nutrients the body uses in metabolic detoxification. These foods are also rich in fiber, which “holds” toxins in the gut, and promotes regular bowel movements.

Among these, the Brassica (mustard) family of vegetables (cauliflower, broccoli, kale, Brussels sprouts) and other dark-green leafy vegetables are particularly potent cleansing foods.

Bitter-tasting vegetables (rapini, arugula, mustard greens, dandelion greens) are great choices because they stimulate secretion of digestive juices and bile (the liver’s vehicle for moving toxins into the gut for excretion). These can be eaten at the start of meals to “prime” the body for digestion, and to “flush” the liver with bile for movement of toxins into the bowels.

Whole grains and chicken are examples of excellent nutrient-rich cleansing foods for rounding out a detoxification diet.

Foods to Avoid

While there are many foods that support the body’s efforts to remove toxins, there are also foods that are best avoided.

Foods containing chemicals (processed and packaged foods containing preservatives, flavour-enhancers and artificial colours) and non-organically produced foods sprayed with chemical herbicides and pesticides are prime examples.

Alcoholic and caffeinated beverages are also commonly excluded from the diet when cleansing.

The more ambitious amongst you may also choose to avoid common allergens (peanuts, tree nuts, cow’s milk, eggs, wheat, soy, fish, shellfish), as processing the products of common allergens also contributes to the liver’s detoxification responsibilities.

Drinking

Drinking water is an important part of any cleansing protocol. Urine is the vehicle by which the body excretes a portion of toxins removed from the blood. A useful, general guideline for water drinking is to drink two to three liters of water daily, spread over the day. Set a timer if you need to be reminded!

Certain teas are also an excellent means of increasing water intake during cleansing. “Liver teas”, often having a bitter taste, can be used to flush the liver by stimulating bile production and flow. Examples of



SEEK BALANCE...

As a guideline, whenever you eat, balance your dietary intake in such a way that ½ of the food you eat consists of non-starchy vegetables and fruit, ¼ are whole grains and the final ¼ are clean proteins (e.g. organic chicken, organic fish, lentils, chickpeas, or hemp).

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