

Want to detox? Exercise, eat healthy foods, and sleep well

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Want to lose weight? Have more energy? Live pain-free? Sleep better?

Detox products—things like supplements, smoothies, diets and

exercises—claim to be remedies for all these problems. They tout themselves as aids in removing toxins from the body, promising improved health and increased energy.

In my practice, I tell my patients to steer clear of those [detox](#) products, especially those with lots of added supplements. That's because it's unlikely they'll do any good. In some cases, they can actually cause serious harm.

The truth is, a normal, healthy body detoxes on its own. That's what keeps us alive.

However, there are healthy, inexpensive ways to help your body detox itself, but it's not easy as drinking a supplement-filled smoothie.

What is a detox?

A detox is the process of removing toxins—a generic term for something that makes you feel unwell—from your body. Your body does this automatically, though. That's the job of the [liver](#) and other organs. If you eat something you're not supposed to, or take too much of a medication, the liver helps metabolize everything.

When you say, "I just need to detox," what are you really saying? Are you fatigued? Having joint pains? Gaining weight? Noticing changes in bowel movements? Those are concrete things your medical provider can address.

Do toxins build up in the body?

There is no reason why toxins would build up in a healthy person. In most cases, the body has mechanisms to naturally clean out toxins.

What about in an unhealthy person?

If you have kidney, liver or other [health problems](#), you could have issues with flushing out things, but it's something a doctor should handle. I'd be more worried if you had pre-existing [medical conditions](#) and were taking these detox products because they can cause more damage than they would in a healthy person.

What's wrong with detox products?

A lot of detox supplements and herbal concoctions, even the ones sold at well-known health food stores, are not regulated in any sort of way. Besides spending a lot of money on them, you can get into a lot of trouble because there's no way of knowing what's in it. There's no way to know if what's on the label is what's in the bottle. And there's no way to know how your body is going to react to the 20 different types of herbs it has in it.

If it's classified as a supplement, it doesn't have to go through the same FDA approval that other drugs do. That's why it's easy to buy a big jug of liver detox. Most of the time, if you take it, nothing happens. But I've seen people come to our hospital with severe liver damage from some of these herbal supplements. Doctors worry about these packaged, herbal types of things.

What if it's all natural?

Natural can mean anything. Natural just means that it comes from nature. Mushrooms that grow in the ground and could kill you in a second are natural. People say, "Well, it's natural, it can't hurt." It can.

Is there any benefit to detox products?

There could be some placebo effect, where you think you're feeling better. But it's more likely because you are exercising more and eating healthier. There are very few, if any, well-designed scientific studies that show a benefit to detox supplements. If there were, doctors would know about them and a drug company would be making trillions of dollars on them.

How do you safely detox?

Although it's not fun, and no one wants to hear it, the thing that we know that works to detox the body is regular exercise, eating healthy, being active, and limiting or avoiding alcohol.

Exercise will make you feel well and strengthen your [body](#), and that's good. Or you can do a healthy detox by eating non-processed and non-supplement-filled foods. Detox diets with extreme calorie or food restrictions, might provide short-term weight loss but aren't good long-term solutions.

The biggest thing I'm seeing now, in the U.S. and around the world, is fatty liver disease. It's caused by diabetes, high cholesterol, hypertension and obesity. So you can help your liver detox bad things by making lifestyle changes to control those diseases.

Do I need to tell my doctor if I'm doing a detox?

Yes. Whatever your problem, buying detox products is not the answer. It's not like every [supplement](#) you take is going to kill you. But there's a safe way to do this and it should start with your healthcare provider. Ask them if something like that would be right for you. You definitely don't want to do this unsupervised.

As a liver doctor, do these detox products get you mad?

It's frustrating when there's pushback to an evidence-based standard of care. And it's frustrating to see patients spend hundreds of dollars a month on these detox supplements. They should save their money. If you're buying detox products, that's a clue that we, as a team, need to spend more time educating you, the patient. I'll ask why you're taking it, and that can uncover other symptoms or problems that are important for me to know about and help solve them.

Provided by University of Chicago Medical Center

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