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The truth about 'colon cleansing'

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By JUDY FOREMAN / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

To read the Internet ads, you'd think that our bodies were awash in toxins and that we should therefore go to dramatic lengths such as colon cleansing and chelation to get rid of all this bad stuff.

Don't believe it. Or, to put it more gently, before you risk your health or money on programs that promise to detoxify you, do lots of homework. And think twice – or 20 times – before undergoing chelation, which uses powerful drugs to rid your body of heavy metals such as mercury and lead.

Some alternative-medicine practitioners such as Dr. Glenn Rothfeld, medical director of WholeHealth New England in Arlington, Mass., believe that cleaning the colon occasionally may help some people, particularly those with irritable bowel syndrome, "though whether it helps by getting rid of toxins is not clear," he says.

Some evidence

And there's some evidence, Dr. Rothfeld says, that the digestive tracts of people who eat typical Western diets may move wastes more slowly than those of people who eat more fiber. In theory, this longer transit time could mean that some substances such as nitrosamines, which are found in preserved meats and are carcinogenic in animals, have more time to cause trouble.

Generally, people don't need to take dramatic steps to detoxify themselves because human bodies have multiple systems for getting rid of wastes, such as sweating, exhaling, urinating and defecating. If you really want a clean system, eat more fruits and vegetables and less junk food.

'Urban legend'

"I've heard my kids say that there's stuff in the [gastrointestinal] tract for seven years," says Dr. Douglas Pleskow, a gastroenterologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in [Boston](#). "That is the urban legend. In reality, most people clear their GI tract within three days."

The ads for colon cleansing also are remarkably vague about which toxins would be purged with enemas, laxatives or special diets. Asked which toxins his colon cleansing dietary regimen called Master Cleanse gets rid of, author Peter Glickman, an advocate of a raw-food diet, spoke of "metabolic toxins," parasites and "environmental toxins ... whatever kinds of stuff we're breathing in air."

Wrong, says Dr. Bennett Roth, a gastroenterologist at [UCLA](#): "There is absolutely no science to this whatsoever. There is no such thing as getting rid of quote-unquote 'toxins.' The colon was made to carry stool. This is total baloney."

What's in the intestinal tract is mostly bacteria, which can aid in digestion. "An enema or laxative does not get rid of more 'bad' vs. 'good' bacteria," said Dr. David Heber, director of the UCLA Center for Human

Nutrition. "We don't like the idea of carrying bacteria, so lots of folks want to cleanse, but remember: Bacteria can be your friend."

Perhaps most worrisome, colon cleansing can be dangerous because most techniques draw fluid from surrounding tissues into the colon. This disrupts the balance of electrolytes such as sodium, potassium, chloride, calcium, magnesium and phosphorus, says Dr. Pleskow of Beth Israel. This shift in fluids can lead to dehydration and low blood pressure.

As for chelation, it can help get rid of heavy metals such as lead in people with very high blood levels. But the chelating drugs can be toxic to the liver and kidneys.

It is inappropriate for people who have near-normal levels of heavy metals to get chelation therapy, says Dr. Rose Goldman, an associate professor of environmental health at the [Harvard](#) School of Public Health.

Beware of practitioners who use hair sampling to detect multiple heavy metals and elements, Dr. Goldman says. "This type of hair sampling is highly inaccurate," she says.

If you do decide on chelation, ask whether the physician is board certified by either the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education or the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

And before you try chelation, says Dr. Alan Woolf, director of the pediatric environmental health center at [Children's Hospital Boston](#), make sure the environment is as free as possible of the contaminant in question so you don't recontaminate yourself. And try conservative treatments first – such as adding calcium, zinc and iron to the diet – because these minerals can block absorption of lead into the body.

Judy Foreman's column appears periodically in Healthy Living.