

The GREAT DETOX DEBATE

WHAT HEALTH EXPERTS REALLY THINK

It's the divisive term with hundreds of millions of hits online. But could your kooky juice cleanse or liver reboot be a total waste of time and money? *Body+Soul* went deep in our search for the truth

BY LAUREN CLARK

Detox is the controversial, five-letter word that has lingered long on the health scene. But the million-dollar question: is going down this murky wellness road ever a good idea?

Before we jump into this decades-old debate, though, some handy background. The term 'detox' is defined as the process of removing something harmful – which sounds great in theory, so why does it ring so many alarm bells? Well, since the 'master cleanse' era in the 1940s and then again in the '70s, the term has been co-opted by the health industry and taken to worrying extremes. Arduous regimes with promised perks like weight loss, enhanced energy and bolstered immunity have been packaged and peddled to the masses.

Despite an increased awareness of nutritional misinformation and a strong movement against the toxic 'diet' culture of the noughties, the presence of detoxes on the wellness scene has refused to budge, much like that stubborn sauce stain on your favourite white T-shirt. The hashtag #bestdetoxcleanse has had over 100 million hits on TikTok and dubious products such as 'detox teas' can readily be found on supermarket shelves. What's more, the space has mushroomed, with the concept attached to a fresh assortment of detoxifying promises – from cleansing your liver to resetting your relationship with tech.

But before you're tempted by the prospect of 'cleansing' your life, it's time to consider if this enduring trend has any substance or if we actually need a detox from detoxing – for good. So we asked leading experts for their insights on which have a place in today's health space, and which should stay well in the past.



The LIVER DETOX

Also called a liver cleanse or liver reset, this detox "purports to eliminate 'toxins' from the body, through diet or lifestyle changes in order to improve liver function," says Michelle Theodosi, a dietitian and founder of Sydney-based clinic, The Lifestyle Dietitian. However, this detox is basically a slippery slope towards money down the drain. "The liver is naturally capable of detoxifying itself," she points out.

THE LOWDOWN: Put down that raw vegetable juice and step away from this detox. "Instead, sip plenty of water and consume a diet rich in fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, dairy and lean protein," suggests Theodosi. Better still? "Reduce or avoid alcohol, which will lessen the burden on your liver," she adds.

The CAFFEINE DETOX

There is brewing awareness that caffeine – present in drinks like coffee and tea – can impact sleep quality, mood and digestion. So, should we forgo our flat whites? "It depends," notes Theodosi. "While eliminating caffeine has been shown to improve various aspects of health, options like black coffee are also rich in heart-healthy antioxidants and polyphenols."

THE LOWDOWN: If you want to reduce your caffeine intake, try slowly cutting back on the amount of coffee you drink each week and see how your body responds. "Gradually reduce your intake to limit withdrawal symptoms," advises Theodosi, noting side-effects like irritability and drowsiness. "Swap in non-caffeinated options like peppermint tea, kombucha or decaf coffee."

The JUICE DETOX

'Juicing' is the OG detox or cleanse, and one often marketed for weight-loss purposes. Unsurprisingly, the research is hazy – any results from this detox will likely be down to factors such as calorie reduction or water loss. "There is no evidence of long-lasting effects – and there is even the risk of weight gain caused by a spike in the appetite-inducing stress hormone, cortisol," explains Maria Andonopoulos, a dietitian, nutritionist and founder of Sydney-based clinic, Dietology. "It may also, in the short term, trigger headaches, fainting, low mood and nutrient deficiencies."

THE LOWDOWN: Do yourself a solid and avoid this one. "Focus on a healthy, balanced diet – including two servings of fruit and five servings of vegetables daily in their whole form," recommends Andonopoulos. Although you don't have to give up your daily smoothie if it's part of a balanced diet, Andonopoulos simply advises that you "blend rather than juice" your fruit and veg to naturally increase your intake of blood sugar-stabilising fibre.

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The liver is naturally capable of detoxifying itself”

– MICHELLE THEODOSI

The DIGITAL DETOX

One of the newest entrants on the detox scene, the digital cleanse involves anything from cutting back on social media use to reducing the time you spend staring at screens daily. Indeed, a recent study found that just two weeks logged out had a positive effect. "Research shows switching off from tech, for a period, can boost physical and mental wellbeing," says health psychologist **Dr Ravi Gill**. "The pressure to stay connected can lead to heightened anxiety, while excessive screen time may sabotage sleep and constant notifications can interfere with productivity." The other major bonus? Less time spent glued to devices can encourage more real-life human interaction as well as exercise, while time away from the socials may also boost your mood.

THE LOWDOWN: You've got the green light for this digital-age detox. "Set a clear duration – ranging from hours, days or weeks – and places, such as during meals or in the bedroom," suggests **Dr Gill**. It could also be helpful to turn off notifications, delete apps, set up auto-responses, let loved ones know and plan alternative activities to help ease phone withdrawal.

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– DR RAVI GILL

The GUT DETOX

"This promises to restore the gut microbiome by removing 'toxins' – through practices like juicing and periodic fasting," explains Andonopoulos. Also known as a gut reset or gut cleanse, despite benefits being touted by those who rate this detox idea, Andonopoulos notes "studies conducted have been small and don't show long-term outcomes."

THE LOWDOWN: In short: save your cash and steer clear. "Top up on prebiotics via foods like garlic, leeks, bananas and oats, as well as probiotics through yoghurt, kefir and kimchi," recommends Andonopoulos. "Aim for 25 grams of fibre per day – plentiful in fruit, vegetables, legumes and wholegrains."

The DOPAMINE DETOX

The idea behind this intriguing 'detox' is that getting comfortable with boredom can help boost mental wellbeing and cognitive function. "Dopamine is a neurotransmitter involved with pleasure and motivation," explains Dr Gill. "Also called a dopamine fast, the idea is that the brain's reward pathways are reset when you temporarily abstain from activities that provide a quick feel-good 'hit' – such as shopping or watching TV."

THE LOWDOWN: This is one to approach mindfully, with Dr Gill pointing out that although there are currently a lack of direct scientific studies about this detox, "many of the practices involved – such as reducing screen time – have evidence behind them." Her advice? Be alert to other lifestyle factors affecting brain health and always speak to a professional if you're struggling. "Do regular exercise, including cardio, strength training and practices like yoga," adds Dr Gill. "Eat a diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids – found in fish, flaxseeds and walnuts – along with getting enough sleep and limiting screen time." Solid advice.

Science has spoken: crazy diets are out, nutrient density and fuelling your body is the way forward



YOUR DETOX 101

Before even considering a health tweak, soak in this sage advice from trusted wellness pros

SEEK EXPERT ADVICE

Always speak to a healthcare professional first – such as a doctor, dietitian or therapist – before making any drastic changes to your lifestyle.

STRIVE FOR BALANCE

"You don't need to detox to be healthy," insists Andonopoulos. "Instead, prioritise nutritious food, stay hydrated, get plenty of sleep and move regularly."

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

"Labelling extreme diets as 'detoxes' can contribute to the development of disordered eating behaviours," warns Theodosi. For anyone impacted by an eating disorder or body image issues, the Butterfly Foundation is a national charity that provides free, confidential support. Visit butterfly.org.au or call 1800 33 4673.

The FOOT DETOX

Yes, this is a thing. "They come in two forms – adhesive pads applied to the sole, or a foot 'spa' where minerals are added to the water," explains Justin Bradley, acting manager of podiatry and high risk foot services at St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne. You may have seen social media posts suggesting this cleanse can drain 'toxic elements' from the body – unfortunately, they're pulling your leg. "Studies have shown no reduction in levels," says Bradley.

THE LOWDOWN: This is one to ditch, pronto. "However, you should still look after your feet by checking them regularly for skin changes or pain," suggests Bradley. "See a podiatrist or GP if you're concerned."



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