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[BBC Homepage](#)

» [Health Home](#)
[Lifestyle Home](#)

[Your Health](#)
[Conditions](#)
[Healthy Living](#)
[Complementary](#)
[Fitness](#)
[Nutrition](#)
[Your Weight](#)
[Travel Health](#)

[Parenting](#)
[Relationships](#)
[Interactive Area](#)

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Do detox diets work?

by Alison Greenhalgh

What is a detox diet?
Do they work?

The recent fashion for detox or cleansing diets stems from the belief that the food we eat contains a range of harmful substances, which accumulate in our body and need to be purged in some manner. Of course, food is not all pure nutrients and the average diet will inevitably contain some toxic substances (eg alcohol). Fortunately, the human body is well equipped to deal with such toxins, and they are effectively removed and excreted by the liver within hours of consumption.

What is a detox diet?

Detox diets vary, but they typically advise restriction of the diet to raw vegetables, fruit, water and yoghurt - with strict avoidance of foods such as meat, fish, alcohol and stimulants. The recommended duration of this limited regime also varies but may be prescribed for up to a week or ten days. After a week on such a minimal and limited diet, it is not surprising that people report feeling lighter and less lethargic. These are symptoms of a lack of calories rather than the elimination of toxins from the body. Headaches are a common side effect of caffeine withdrawal along with tiredness and irritability in some people.

Do they work?

Although detox diets may make you feel better, the scientific basis for such a stringent diet is somewhat lacking and there is little evidence that there is any good to be gained from following them. The basic misconception is that fruits and vegetables are low in toxins and that meat and fish lead to the accumulation of toxins. In fact, the opposite is often true: vegetables such as cabbage and onions are high in naturally occurring toxins whilst meat and fish have very low levels. The greatest irony is that the body's detoxification organ, the liver, can most effectively breakdown and eliminate toxins on a high protein diet such as one rich in meat and fish.

Now I'm not saying don't eat your greens, of course, fruit and vegetables are very important components of a healthy diet, but the idea that you should exist solely on such foods for days on end is not consistent with the principle of a healthy balanced diet. The every day diet should contain at least five portions of fruit and vegetables as well as lean meat, carbohydrate foods and dairy products. Eating a healthy diet on a daily basis will help the body function properly and it should not be necessary to pursue a detoxification regimen. However if you do find the urge to detox - use this as an excuse to kick start a new healthy eating regime.

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- [Home](#)
- [What is a healthy weight?](#)
- [BMI calculator](#)
- [Reaching your goal](#)
- [Eating well](#)
 - [A balanced diet](#)
 - [Adapting meals](#)
 - [Life stages](#)
 - [Did you know...?](#)
 - [Detoxification diets](#)
 - [Children and food](#)
- [Recipes](#)
- [Being active](#)
- [Seeking medical advice](#)
- [Body image](#)
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[Top of Page](#) ▲

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