

Experts wary of 'detox' diets

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By Josette Keelor — Daily Staff Writer

Director Morgan Spurlock took a chance on his health in 2002 by eating nothing but McDonald's food for 30 days as part of his documentary, "Super Size Me."

Afterward, Spurlock says he returned to his original state of health by exercising and following the strict detoxification diet his girlfriend, vegan chef Alexandra Jamieson, provided.

His claims to have returned to health within only a few months — after abusing his body for 30 days — beg the question, is there a legitimate cleansing diet out there that will aid people in bettering their health, however they have chosen to eat?

A lot of confusion surrounds the idea of cleansing diets and choosing to follow one just because it worked for others is not a good reason, say local professionals, especially if the goal is solely to lose weight quickly.

"You're gonna gain this weight back," says Dr. Sherif Kaiser, head of the bariatric program at Winchester Medical Center, and a doctor with Berryville Medical Associates.

He explains that when people use laxatives or other diuretics in order to lose weight they actually lose mainly water, which is why they will gain back the weight.



Dr. Sherif Kaiser shows charts he uses to discuss treatment options with patients who have digestive problems. Kaiser says that diets promising rapid weight loss do not offer lasting results. Dennis Grundman/Daily



Kaiser, head of the bariatric program at Winchester Medical Center and a doctor with Berryville Medical Associates, works on charts in his Berryville office. Dennis Grundman/Daily

Whether it's the lemon juice and maple syrup diet Master Cleanse, shorter-term detox plans like three-day juice diets, or even the Morgan (Spurlock) Detox Diet, local health and wellness professionals warn that restricting oneself to a diet that does not allow for all needed nutrients is unnecessary and could be unhealthy.

"I, myself, never recommend that sort of diet with that general category," Debbie Berg, a dietitian in Winchester, says of cleansing diets.

"We have a liver and we have functioning diets; if we're healthy, they're going to detox," says Dr. Dean Havron Jr., of the Family Practice of Winchester on Boscawen Street in Winchester.

Kaiser agrees that a healthy person's colon will work fine on its own without the need for enemas or other colon cleansers. These treatments are more useful to people who either have chronic constipation, have an enlarged colon that does not fully cleanse itself, or are preparing for a colonoscopy, he says.

Both physicians recommend using a healthy eating plan as a form of cleansing the body of toxins built up from food or drinks.

"If someone's trying to get healthy, I would advise them first to go to more natural foods, whole grains, fruits and vegetables for 90 percent of their intake for about a week and see how they feel," Berg says. "They'll get rid of a lot of salt, sugar, get processed foods out, and I think they can get just the same benefits [as a cleansing diet]."

The idea of a healthy diet has undergone many changes over the last 30 years, Havron says, but some truths have remained the same. A diet low in calories from refined carbohydrates, sugar, corn syrup and items made from white flour, white potatoes and white rice is your best bet, he says.

"Those [foods] increase the body's secretion of insulin, and when your insulin levels are high, you will put on weight," he says.

A template he recommends for use as a guide for figuring out a healthy diet is the Harvard Healthy Eating Pyramid, listed at the Web site www.hsph.harvard.edu.

Kaiser recommends the Department of Agriculture's food pyramid at the Web site www.mypyramid.gov as an interactive option that allows users to track their progress and see how their diets are working for them.

"Everything in moderation is good," Kaiser says. "You don't want to start a diet when people are starving," he says. If your goal is to lose weight, reducing portion sizes and calories is more effective, he says.

Detox methods can be helpful, however, for people with substance abuse problems, according to employees of one local treatment center.

Sherrie Lassiter, marketing manager of **Bridging the Gaps** integrative addiction treatment center on West Cork Street in Winchester, says that the center uses a cleansing diet in conjunction with psychological and spiritual treatments for those suffering from substance abuse addiction.

"We come up with a tailor-made plan," Lassiter says, explaining that nutritionists at the center plan meals according to patients' needs, depending on food allergies and their addiction. "No two clients really get the same treatment," she says.

"It's also based on where they are medically."

The diet they follow at the center focuses mainly on eliminating gluten, most sugar and caffeine from what they eat and using a lot of organic produce and healthy snacks of dried fruit and nuts.

"They do leave here getting a jolt of what the healthy side of life looks like," she says.

"We detox them with nutritional supplements," says Susan Keckley, a holistic nurse at the center. This helps reprogram the brain to naturally produce endorphins, rather than seek them through outside influences, she says.

"Research has shown that certain foods act as triggers," Lassiter says. Addicts are especially susceptible to food triggers, she says, because, when trying to detox from drugs, they will tend to replace a substance with unhealthy food or drinks.

Instead of alcohol, they're hooked on caffeine, she says.

Supplemental vitamins, grape seed extract and amino acids are some of the forms of treatment that Bridging the Gaps offers those recovering from addiction, says Keckley.

"Any substance overused becomes a weakness — anything, person, activity," she says.

Beginning a healthy eating plan can be a type of cleansing diet, Keckley says. Anything that helps food make it through the body in 24 to 48 hours is cleansing, she says.

Though she does not dispel the belief of starting out a healthy eating regimen with a juice or water fast or other short-term cleansing diet, she explains that each is an individualized program, and people should consider their own responses to food before choosing a cleansing plan.

Though The Morgan Detox Diet helped Spurlock return to health quickly, it seems to reiterate the importance of eating healthy more than other diets do.

"I wouldn't have a big problem with that," Berg says of the detox program, as long as participants get the nutrients they need, she stresses.

Keckley recommends those interested in beginning a cleansing program seek out a nutritional specialist to find out which one will work best for them.

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