Dear Alice,

Could you tell me more about colon cleanses? What exactly does it do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

One might think of a colon cleanse as a switch from using regular toilet paper to pre-moistened wipes, however the process is much more involved than that. Some popular methods of colon cleansing include colonics (also known as colonic hydrotherapy or colonic irrigation) and taking colon-cleansing supplements. In colonics, cool or warm water is flushed into the rectum through one tube and drained through another tube several seconds to a few minutes later. This procedure is usually repeated several times in one session, often with minerals added to the water. Supplement use involves taking supplements that purportedly cause the colon to shed hardened mucous from its walls and leave the body through numerous bowel movements. Sometimes colon cleansing is also accompanied by a detoxification diet that might include drinking large amounts of water and liquids while avoiding solid foods, or eating only large quantities of raw vegetables, fruits, supplements, or herbal laxatives.

Many claims have been made about the benefits of colon cleaning and detox dieting, such as removal of toxins or hardened fecal matter that may be trapped in the walls of the colon. Loss of toxins and fecal matter is in turn supposed to lead to a reduced risk of cancer or improved weight loss. Although in anecdotal reports some people claim to feel "lighter" or better after a detox diet, there is no scientific evidence that shows these procedures to be effective in removing toxins from the body or providing health benefits. In fact, a healthy human body is naturally well equipped to remove toxins on a daily basis, thanks to the hard work of the liver and kidneys.
Some risks of colon cleansing (by colonic or by supplement) are that it can actually cause damage to the body by wiping out the healthy bacteria in the colon, as well as important minerals like as potassium, leading to an electrolyte deficiency or imbalance. In extreme cases, heart failure can occur if too many fluids are absorbed while flushing out the colon with water. The insertion of tubes inside the rectum may cause infection or contamination if they are not properly inserted, sterilized, or removed. Because there is currently no regulation of who is allowed to administer colonics, it's a good idea to be careful in selecting a provider and to be aware of these risks.

So what's the best way to a healthy and happy colon and body? Instead of spending money on procedures or supplements, put it where your mouth is by eating a healthy diet full of fruits and vegetables, and low in red meat and saturated fat. Exercising, not smoking, drinking alcohol in moderation, and getting regular checkups are also good ways to lower the risk for colon and other types of cancer and chronic diseases. You may find this kind of clean living much less invasive than a theory that doesn't hold much water!

Alice!

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