



**CAN  
YOU  
REALLY**

# **DETOX?**

Clean has become the new thin, as women obsess about the energy and health boost they feel by getting rid of toxins and fighting inflammation with food. Its popularity is easy to understand—what's harder to know is if any of this is real. **BY VIRGINIA SOLE-SMITH**



Photographed by  
ANDREW PURCELL



I'm sitting in the loftlike, neon-pink-accented waiting room of Parsley Health, a private practice run by Robin Berzin, M.D., in New York City. Dr. Berzin, who trained at Columbia University's medical school, specializes in functional medicine, which she describes as using food and lifestyle choices to address illness at its roots. I've just had 14 vials of blood drawn, which Dr. Berzin is going to use, along with her clinical exam, to assess how toxic and inflamed my body is. And then we're going to spend the next 21 days scrubbing my insides clean.

I often joke that I put my blood, sweat and tears into my work—but this is the first time I've literally given blood for a story, let alone allowed someone to tell me what to eat and drink for nearly a month. Honestly, I'm a bit nervous. I've rarely gone on a diet and have never been a big drinker, coffee addict or sugar junkie. I simply consume everything—kale and pasta, salmon and steak, water and wine—in moderation. That seems to work just fine: I have low blood pressure, I sleep well, I can swim a mile.

But lately, I've started to wonder if this is enough. Each time I look at my Instagram feed, another five friends are posting about how amazing they feel on one detox diet or another. One does a vegan detox as an annual New Year's ritual. Another lost 15 pounds before her wedding, doing juice cleanses.

Still, ask any detox disciple and she'll tell you it isn't just about losing weight—it's really about feeling "clean," which conjures an almost spiritual state of well-being. We're constantly inundated with news about the dangers of excess, whether it's too much industrial and chemical-laden processed food or just too *much* (stuff, stress, waste). It's easy to feel overwhelmed, guilty and like we've all collectively lost the plot. And so we want to cleanse, to atone, to make ourselves smaller so we feel less culpable about our culture's mindless consumption and the part we play in it. It's as if, through detoxing, we can purge the sludge and anxiety of modern life out of our systems—leaving our organs gleaming, our bodies and moods lighter, our lives transformed.

It's a seductive idea. Particularly the possibility that, fine as I feel, I could feel even *better*. Lately, my energy waxes and wanes throughout the day. I'm still carrying 10 extra pounds from my pregnancy two years ago. And when Dr. Berzin reviews my blood work, she discovers my liver enzymes are elevated. "This could just be because you're still recovering from Saturday night," she says, and in truth, it was a three-margarita kind of weekend. "Or it could be a sign that your liver is a little bit unhappy because it's inflamed by another type of toxin."

But are my friends really feeling so good because they've rid themselves of some kind of toxic pileup? After all, a 2014 study review in the journal of the

British Dietetic Association concluded, "Although the detox industry is booming, there is very little clinical evidence to support the use of these diets." Terms like *detox* and *cleanse* have no official nutritional definitions—they're marketing words slapped on everything from supplements to spa treatments. "It's a good way to sell books and make money, that's for sure," says David L. Katz, M.D., founding director of the Yale University Prevention Research Center. It's also easy to spot the gaping nutritional holes in a total juice cleanse or a fast promoted by some self-styled guru. "Most of these juices have very little protein, so after a few days your body will begin breaking down muscle tissue to find protein it can use," explains Evelyn Tribole, R.D., coauthor of *Intuitive Eating*. "That means you can actually lose muscle mass on a cleanse, and your kidneys have to work much harder to excrete excess nitrogen created in the process." Less muscle, overtaxed kidneys, got it. No thanks.

Still, there are plenty of detox programs that let you eat actual food. These are often created or endorsed by medical doctors trained to practice evidence-based medicine, so I'm much more inclined to listen to their recommendations. "A detox is an opportunity to reset and break bad patterns," Dr. Berzin says when I ask why I'm doing this. "It's only by cutting out all potential trigger foods that you can really find out what you feel like at 100 percent clean."

I look over my marching orders from Dr. Berzin: No alcohol. No caffeine. No gluten. No soy. No dairy. No refined sugar. Instead, I'll drink a shake made with almond milk, berries, greens and a plant-based protein powder for breakfast, and spend the rest of the day munching organic vegetables, fruit, nuts and gluten-free grains like quinoa. (I also need to eat "clean" meat and eggs; Dr. Berzin's program is "plant-based paleo," while many detoxes take a vegan approach.) Can you really use food to cleanse your body—and boost energy, reduce inflammation and improve your health in less than a month? I'm about to find out.

## TOXIC AVENGERS

This idea of physical purification resonates so deeply right now, says Woodson Merrell, M.D., author of *The Detox Prescription*, because we are under siege. "We all walk around with accumulations of chemical toxins in our bodies," explains Dr. Merrell, who is also chairman of the Department of Integrative Medicine at Mount Sinai Beth Israel in New York City. Indeed, research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found detectable levels of more than 200 environmental chemicals like pesticides, flame retardants and tobacco smoke by-products in the blood and urine of large sample groups. Some

of these are known carcinogens, while others may disrupt the body's natural hormone balance by mimicking estrogen. Scientists are still exploring how this might increase our risk for obesity, diabetes, cancer and many other health problems. "For most of these chemicals, we have no idea what level of exposure is truly safe for each person or what happens when you're exposed to so many chemicals all at once," Dr. Merrell says. Add to that our standard American diet, heavy in processed foods with high levels of saturated fat, refined sugar and chemical additives, and you can see why so many of us feel like we need to clean up our acts.

But your body comes equipped with its own automatic detoxification system, principally your liver and kidneys. Removing impurities and waste products is their *raison d'être*: As blood flows through your body, it's filtered by your liver, which snatches up toxins, cholesterol and other nasties that enter

**"The inside of your body is not dirty. It does not need cleaning," says one doctor.**

the system (often through the food we eat, but also via air, water and toiletries) and circulate in the bloodstream. Your liver then uses a two-phase process to get those unwanted things out. First, it releases special enzymes to convert the toxic molecules into new, unstable molecules known as free radicals. Then those free radicals are bound to certain substances that essentially fast-track them over to your kidneys, so you can pee them out. (You also excrete some toxins through stool, sweat and simply exhaling.) It's a beautiful system, and most experts consulted for this story agreed that as long as you're eating a relatively healthy diet, you don't need to worry about it. "The inside of your body is not dirty, and it does not need cleaning," asserts Michael Gershon, M.D., professor of cell biology and pathology at Columbia University Medical Center and author of *The Second Brain*.

On the other hand, it evidently doesn't take much more than one night of cocktails to push the liver into overdrive. "Your body is equipped to detoxify natural compounds found in the environment," Dr. Merrell says. "But your liver was never designed to process the amounts of industrial toxins it encounters today." Some chemicals, like lead—absorbed from pollution, old pipes and paint—get stuck in the bone. Others, like those derived from pesticides or plastics, are stored in the body's fat cells for years.

It's whether we can do anything about such stuck chemicals that sparks debate. Functional-medicine doctors argue that we can use food to optimize the

natural detoxification process. "We need to eat a wide range of fruit and vegetables, because if your body doesn't have enough phytonutrients available during the second phase of detox, it won't be able to neutralize the toxic free radicals created during the first phase," Dr. Merrell explains. He says these nutrients help create enzymes that act like sponges, soaking up toxins in our cells and wringing them out of our bodies. He refers me to a few dozen studies to support this; some were done in labs, where scientists infect human tissue samples with toxic chemicals in petri dishes, then observe how compounds from plants like ginger and coriander affect the cells' ability to secrete the toxins. Others were done on rats or small human populations, like a study funded by the National Cancer Institute, which found that 11 smokers who ate 2 ounces of watercress with each meal excreted higher levels of the carcinogens found in tobacco.

Dr. Merrell says this research is a promising sign of food's ability to detoxify (and adds that nutrition studies are hard to repeat in randomized controlled studies, since you can't inject humans with toxins). But other doctors and researchers point to the limitations of such experimental data. "Certainly we'd all be better off eating more watercress, but that's just one particular food and one small group of people," says Ather Ali, N.D., a naturopathic doctor at the Yale School of Medicine. And data from lab tests is even less clear-cut: "We can't say that such findings would translate directly to what happens in the complex system of the human body."

My body is already rebelling. Day two, I make my smoothie, then go out to brunch with friends and look on longingly while everyone else orders piles of pancakes. Soon, I'm feeling nauseous, irritable and exhausted. I perk up a bit after lunch (three free-range eggs and a pile of organic, pesticide-free kale sautéed in olive oil, lemon and garlic), but by 3 P.M., I'm grouchy and foggy again. Is this my system detoxifying itself? I call Dr. Berzin to check in and appreciate her honesty. "It may be caffeine or sugar withdrawal, or it may be chemical detoxification," she says. "I can't say for sure what's happening to you right now."

## THE INFLAMMATION GAME

What interests me most about detoxing, at least the way Dr. Berzin prescribes it, is whether it has the potential to reduce inflammation in our bodies. Inflammation is a well-established medical concept, and Dr. Berzin's explanation is pretty simple: "If you're consistently eating foods that cause a low-grade allergic reaction or contain lots of toxins, your immune system is constantly kicking into gear," she says. That immune response is, by its very nature, inflammatory, because

DETOX > 100



## PLAY LIKE A GIRL

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stronger and healthier.”

Those are all attributes that come in handy not only on the runway but also back home in Nashville, where she now lives with her husband, Kings of Leon front man Caleb Followill, and their 3-year-old daughter, Dixie Pearl. The couple met in 2007 at Coachella, where they fell in love at first tequila. Well, almost: “My friend brought me backstage, Caleb started talking to us, and I asked him for a shot,” recalls Aldridge, laughing. “We did one together, and then I left to watch Rage Against the Machine.” A few weeks later, she went to a second Kings concert in New York and he called her afterward. As she says now, “That was

it. We’ve been together for eight years, and he’s the love of my life. He’s my man.”

Followill is also her occasional workout buddy. The two just started running together—usually a couple of miles a few days a week. “I’m not a jogger, but Caleb is,” she says. “He gets in the zone, but I’m like, Where is this zone? I need to find this zone!” To persevere, she channels her friend model Karlie Kloss. “Karlie posted on Instagram that she hated jogging but was going to run a marathon. I figure if she can run, I can, too.”

When she’s not on the move, Aldridge loves to spend her free time at home, listening to Neil Young’s *Harvest Moon*, swimming with Dixie (“she’s *the* most important thing in my life”) and playing non-varsity sports such as shuffleboard, cornhole and horseshoes with family. “All of the Followills are very competitive,” Aldridge says. “I am, too. I want to win.”

She also likes to cook for loved ones, including bestie and former neighbor Taylor Swift. (Swift recently named Aldridge one of the most inspiring women she knows: “She balances being one of the

busiest career women in the world with being her little girl’s best friend, doting mother, favorite playmate and constant companion.”) “Taylor is salt of the earth,” Aldridge says. A love of cooking is one of the many things that brought them together. “I’m a humongous foodie,” she says. “Ina Garten is my hero.” Aldridge tries to eat healthy most of the time, but when she decides to indulge, she doesn’t hesitate. “I’m a cheeseburger kind of girl,” she says, adding, “and an ice cream kind of girl, and a chocolate kind of girl.”

As she looks to her future beyond this summer, it resembles a Tennessee sunrise—bright and beautifully hazy. “I’m not sure what I want to do next,” Aldridge says. “I know I want to be a model and businesswoman as long as possible. Maybe one day I’ll create a kids’ line, inspired by Dixie. Or a skin-care line, since I’m such a girlie girl.” Whatever she chooses, she’ll stay true to her roots. “I was, and always will be, very sporty,” she says. “I think women athletes are incredibly strong and powerful, and to me that’s the most beautiful thing in the world.” ●

## CAN YOU REALLY DETOX?

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it has to produce lots of proteins (called antibodies) and chemical agents to fight off invaders. Which is what you want them doing—just not all the time. “Once your immune response is on, it’s on system-wide,” Dr. Berzin explains. “That leads to a chronic state of low-level inflammation, which can cause all sorts of problems.” Think acne, migraines and weight gain in the short term, with heart disease looming down the road.

Cutting out all the foods that might be

inflammatory to give your body a chance to heal is Dr. Berzin’s main rationale for the 21 days, because that’s how long she believes it takes for the antibodies and chemical agents to retreat after a major immune response. Then she encourages her patients to gradually reintroduce potential triggers. (While high doses of sugar and alcohol are widely accepted as inflammatory, some experts assert that only very few of us have a problem with gluten and soy.) Some people discover they really do have trouble tolerating one or two foods. Others realize they feel fine eating them as long as they don’t overindulge, which frankly doesn’t sound so different from my original moderation philosophy.

Since I’m lousy at extremes, week two is when I fall off the wagon. It’s my birthday, and I can’t refuse my mother’s homemade chocolate cheesecake and a single vodka seltzer. The next day I wake

up with a new breakout on my nose and later get a migraine. It’s very tempting to connect the dots. But I’ve also been juggling work deadlines, I’m coming off jet lag and I have my period—all classic acne or migraine triggers. This may be the hardest part of evaluating the science behind any detox plan: How what we eat makes us feel is, to a large extent, subjective, because we can never control every variable. Life is not a science lab.

## CLEAR AND PRESENT

Nevertheless, the chance to assess how you feel making more thoughtful food choices is the one potential detox benefit that almost every expert I spoke with acknowledged, albeit begrudgingly. “A cleanse does require focus,” notes Dr. Katz. “It’s a chance to go from eating and living mindlessly to mindfully. There

can be some potential benefit in ‘rebooting’ that way.” Ali adds that the social support and accountability that some group diets encourage can be beneficial, especially if they coincide with you eating more fruit and vegetables and losing a few pounds.

Indeed, weight loss is fairly low on my list of priorities when I begin the program, but it’s sort of impossible not to think about it when I’m regularly refusing bread, cheese and wine (and counting the days until their return). I ask Dr. Berzin whether she worries about how a “detox-to-retox” lifestyle can border on disordered eating. “I think the people who get obsessed with detoxing are a small minority,” she says. “But I don’t advocate for more extreme programs because I don’t know if they’re safe in the long run.”

So can you really detox with food? We don’t yet know for sure. But we all might be better off if we forget the quasi-religious overtones of “100 percent clean.” There’s more to gain if we treat such programs not as science experiments but as chances to better understand our relationship with food. “Call it a change of pace, not a detox,” Ali urges. “Any change can help you be more mindful and notice patterns you might not have been aware of before. If you notice you feel better and the changes you’ve made are sustainable, it might make sense to continue certain aspects of the program.” Dr. Merrell, meanwhile, makes the point that not letting in so many toxins to begin with—via nonorganic produce, plastics and household chemicals—is as important as trying to wring them out.

It’s day 21, and I’m ready to get back to making my own food decisions. But I also feel...not transformed, exactly, but good. I’m enjoying each meal and staying satisfied for longer in between, which means less mindless snacking. I’ve lost 4 pounds and my blood work shows my liver function is back to normal. A marker of my sugar metabolism, which Dr. Berzin had deemed “prediabetic,” is now in the safe range. On top of which, I am eating more fruit and vegetables—which we can all agree is a good thing. Am I any less “toxic” than I was three weeks ago? I’m still not sure I was all that dirty to begin with. But I now know that eating “clean” isn’t all that hard—as long as you allow for the occasional piece of cake. ●

**Cover** Tank dress, Laain, \$300; Net-A-Porter.com. Skirt, \$750; TamaraMellon.com. Necklace, H.Stern, \$2,600; 212-655-3910. Arm sleeve, McDavid, \$20; McDavidUSA.com. Cleats, \$50; Nike.com. **Page 4** Silver tank, \$175; MonrealLondon.com. Skirt, Dion Lee, \$878; Bergdorf Goodman, 212-753-7300. **Page 16** Mesh sports bra, \$120, and orange sports bra, \$98, VPL; IntermixOnline.com. Capri pants, \$240; Lucas Hugh.com. Sneakers, Adidas by Stella McCartney, \$160; Adidas.com. **Page 34** Dress; Victoria Beckham.com for similar styles. Earring, \$123; VenusByMariaTash.com. **Page 43** Sports bra, Calvin Klein Underwear, \$39; Macys.com. Leggings, \$145; AsteriaActive.com. **Page 50** Sports bra, \$42, leggings, \$60, and shoes, \$115; TheNorthFace.com. **Pages 66–67** Dress, Issa, \$3,650; IssaLondon.com. Bodysuit, \$42; AmericanApparel.net. Arm sleeve, McDavid, \$20; McDavidUSA.com. Cleats, \$50; Nike.com. On him: Shirt, \$85, tights, \$50, socks, \$18 for three pairs, and sneakers, \$100; Nike.com. **Page 68** Bodysuit, H&M, \$30; HM.com. Skirt, Barbara Casasola, \$2,500; Net-A-Porter.com. Thin bangle, \$78, and thick bangles, \$68 for two; GemmaRedux.com. **Page 70** Dress, Julien Macdonald, price upon request; Bergdorf Goodman,

800-558-1855. Tank, \$250; MonrealLondon.com. Cleats, \$220; Puma.com. **Page 71** Striped dress, \$495; Baja-East.com. Fringe tank, Timo Weiland, \$298; Intermix, 646-480-5762. On him: Jersey, \$55, and shorts, \$55; Nike.com. **Page 72** Bikini top, \$31, and bottom; Victorias Secret.com. Skirt, Herve Leger by Max Azria, \$1,090; BCBG.com. Hat, \$35; VeloceHats.com. Volleyball, \$60; Wilson.com. On him: Sunglasses, \$220; Oakley.com. **Page 73** Shirt, \$80; Falke.com. Skirt, Ronny Kobo, \$356; Bloomingdales.com. Necklace, H.Stern, \$2,600; 212-655-3910. Cleats, \$35; Nike.com. **Page 74** Dress, The Row, \$950; 310-853-1900. Necklace, Kenneth Jay Lane, \$25; 877-953-5264. **Page 75** Dress, Rebecca Taylor, \$325; 212-243-2600. Choker, \$150; 31PhillipLim.com. Necklace, \$275; Bande DesQuatres.com. **Page 76** Dress, Stella McCartney, \$930; 212-255-1556. Bikini, \$370; TomasMaier.com. Necklaces, George Frost, \$240 each; Lulu Frost.com. **Page 77** Dress, Proenza Schouler, \$2,250; 212-585-3200. Necklace, \$295; ToryBurch.com. **Page 78** Dress, Calvin Klein Collection, \$2,995; 212-292-9000. Necklace, George Frost, \$240; LuluFrost.com. **Page 79** Dress, \$2,279; Osklen.com. Necklace, Lizzie Fortunato, \$290;

NeimanMarcus.com. **Page 81** Black top, \$74; OlympiaActivewear.com. White top, \$125, and pants, \$139; AsteriaActive.com. Hand wraps, \$8, and shoes, \$90, Adidas Combat Sports; ACSGear.com. **Page 82** Vest, \$50; VictoriasSecret.com. Top, \$130; BethRichards.com. Sports bra, \$135; RichardNicoll.com for stores. **Page 84** Tank, T by Alexander Wang, \$160; AlexanderWang.com. Sports bra, \$60; 2XU.com. Pants, \$110; TullyLou.com.au. **Page 85** Top: Gray sports bra, \$85; HeroineSport.com. Black sports bra, Korla Activewear, \$92; RevolveClothing.com. Pants, \$94; Olympia Activewear.com. Left: Swimsuit, \$135; Sweaty Betty.com. Sports bra, \$74; OlympiaActive wear.com. Shorts, Under Armour, \$25; UA.com. **Page 90** Tank, Altuzarra, \$795; Barneys.com. Bikini bottom, Charlie by Matthew Zink, \$280 for the set; CharlieByMZ.com. Earrings, Aurélie Bidermann, \$560; 212-335-0604. Cuff, \$495; Maiyet.com. **Page 91** Shirt, Rebecca Minkoff, \$248; 866-838-6991. Bikini top, Charlie by Matthew Zink, \$280 for the set; CharlieByMZ.com. Earrings, Sorelle, \$120; Sorelle NYC.com. **Page 92** Swimsuit, Michael Michael Kors, \$114; Michael Kors.com. Earrings, Kendall Conrad, \$190; Kendall ConradDesign.com.

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