

Keeping Clean: An Inside Job

Most of us spend a lot of time keeping things clean. We bathe, wash dishes, vacuum our carpets, sweep our floors, take our cars to the car wash, and launder our clothes. However, very few of us ever give thought to the idea of internal cleanliness. But, it isn't just the outside of the body and our environment that must be kept clean. We also need to be clean on the inside.

Every day, as we consume foods and beverages and burn them for energy, the body creates waste products. Eliminating these by-products of metabolism is so important that the body has many different systems for breaking them down and eliminating them. Were it not for the incredible efficiency of the lymphatic system, the liver, the kidneys, the sweat glands and oil ducts in our skin, our colon, and the mucus membranes of our sinuses and lungs, our body would suffocate in its own waste in a couple of days.

Just because we aren't dead, however, doesn't mean that our eliminative organs are working at peak efficiency. When a furnace, automobile, or any other mechanical device starts to get dirty, its efficiency diminishes. The same is true for the body. If the efficiency of one or more eliminative channels drops just 10-20% it won't be enough to kill us, but it certainly will have a gradual, and cumulative effect on our energy level and health.

That's why traditional herbalism and naturopathy have always placed a heavy emphasis on hygiene, not just external hygiene, but internal hygiene as well. Therapies dedicated to opening up and strengthening eliminative channels have been collectively known as cleansing.

Cleansing is especially important in modern society. While public sanitation and attention to external cleanliness have helped to ensure we don't have plagues or get diarrhea from contaminated water, we have a new problem on our hands—environmental pollution.

Modern Chemical Exposure

Every day we are exposed to hundreds (if not thousands) of chemicals, many of which did not even exist 100 years ago. These chemicals are present in the air we breathe, in the water we drink, in the food we consume and products which come in contact with our skin. We have air pollutants from automobiles and industry. We have water pollutants from agricultural runoff, industrial contamination, and even from the water treatment delivery systems that bring treated water into our homes.

The foods we eat also contain chemicals. There are traces of agricultural chemicals, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides that are used on crops. Processed foods are also laced with additives—preservatives, artificial flavorings and colorings, emulsifiers, anti-caking agents, texture enhancers, and so forth. My personal health regime involves avoiding as many of these chemicals as I can by purchasing foods in as natural a state as I can, and using organically-grown foods whenever possible.

There are chemicals in our cleaning products, cosmetics, fabrics, furniture and building materials. So many, in fact, that people who move into a new home often experience headaches, aches and pains, lethargy and other symptoms of environmental illness. This happens because of the outgassing of formaldehyde, solvents and other chemicals found in carpets, paints, glues, wood and other materials used to build the homes.

For instance, I once had an employee who started getting migraines after moving into a new trailer home. When I encouraged her to open all the windows and air the place out for a couple of weeks and fill her house with plants to purify the air, the headaches stopped.

Of course, we are assured that these chemicals are safe because they've all been tested—right? Well, laying aside the fact that some of these chemicals haven't been properly tested, there is still a problem with the research that has been done. These chemicals are typically tested one at a time to determine safe levels. They aren't tested in combination.

It's true that the body can handle small amounts of toxins. It does so all the time. Even natural foods have small amounts of toxic materials. That's why the body is equipped with detoxification systems. These detoxification processes are part of our immune system.

So, the problem occurs when we're getting small amounts of many different toxins, which is what is happening in modern society. When you add the problem of nutritional deficiencies caused by poor nutrition, the problem becomes compounded. Often the detoxification processes in our immune system are simply overwhelmed. The nutrients aren't there to handle the load.

So, the more we can minimize our exposure to toxins, the less stress we place on our immune system. We don't need to be paranoid about toxins. (I've met people who are so obsessed with this issue that they live in constant fear and worry; and that's not good for your health either. The simple fact is that we just need to use common sense and avoid environmental toxins and chemicals as much as we can. In addition, we can also provide nutrients that will enhance the function of the immune system to help us deal with the toxins we can't avoid.

A Healthy Body Detoxifies Naturally

When it has the nutrition it needs, the body has the capacity to ramp up its efforts to flush toxins when it feels overwhelmed. We've all experienced the body's ability to get rid of toxins when we've thrown up after eating tainted food. Perhaps you can also remember a time when your sinuses started to run after you inhaled some smoke or irritating chemicals. Other examples of these defensive mechanisms at work include getting a skin rash after exposure to an irritating substance. All of these defense mechanisms—vomiting, diarrhea, sinus drainage (including sneezing and coughing), and skin eruptions—are demonstrations of the immune system's ability to throw off irritating substances.

Unfortunately, most people don't understand this. They think that the vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, sinus drainage or skin eruption is caused by the disease. So, they go to the doctor or drugstore seeking some medication which will block or halt these efforts of the body to flush irritants. The drugs themselves are also chemicals, and add a further burden to the immune and detoxification systems of the body, thus sending the system on a downward spiral. As the body is unable to eliminate the backlog of toxins, they irritate, inflame and damage various tissues and organs.

Inflammation can be thought of as the “mother” of all diseases. Nearly all chronic and degenerative diseases begin with an inflammatory process, including heart disease and cancer. These diseases are the end result of damage to the body from uneliminated toxins and nutritional deficiencies.

When the body can't flush the toxins, it tries to find some way to store or neutralize them in order to

protect tissues from further inflammation or damage. Fat deposits, cysts, growths, weakened tissues and organs can all wind up as toxic waste storage facilities. The fact that fats sequester toxins also helps explain why more than 60% of us are overweight. In the end, the weakened organs and tissues where the toxins often wind up so diseased that they have to be surgically removed. (Which, when one thinks about it, could be thought of as a really extreme method of detoxification.)

Protecting the Body from Toxins

When we consider all of this, we can see that it's important in modern society to do all we can to protect our body against toxins. As mentioned earlier, the body needs nutrients to detoxify, which is why we need to avoid refined and processed foods in favor of nutritionally dense foods like fresh fruits and vegetables (preferably organically grown), whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, and animal foods that are as natural as possible (definitely organic and preferably free range or grass fed). Because modern foods still tend to be nutrient deficient we may also need to supplement our diets with extra vitamins and minerals, fiber and herbs that enhance our body's ability to detoxify. One of the herbs that is particularly helpful in this regard is milk thistle, which helps protect the liver against toxins.

Spring and fall are ideal times to do a cleanse, so consider doing one before the holidays. Don't let your body systems get dirty. Keep them clean so you can operate at peak efficiency.

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