

For The Love Of God, Please Don't Do A "Saltwater Cleanse"



If someone told you to chug a big glass of salt water to potentially improve your health, would you do it? Most of us gag at the thought of accidentally swallowing some salt water at the beach, so drinking it on purpose sounds completely disgusting. Nevertheless, according to certain health bloggers on the internet, drinking a glass of salt water on an empty stomach will "remove toxins" from your body, cleanse your colon, solve digestive issues, and balance your hormones. So, what we're about to say might make some believers a little salty: a saltwater cleanse is actually a really horrible idea.

Let's break down what happens when you drink salt water: Salt is sodium and chloride, which are electrolytes that already exist in your blood and hold onto water, says Gina Sam, MD, MPH, a gastroenterologist in New York City. When you drink salt water, the excess sodium and chloride essentially pull water into your colon, stimulating a bowel movement. In fact, many laxatives that doctors prescribe to prepare for a colonoscopy are salt-based for this very reason, she says. "So essentially, what you're doing isn't something fancy, you're basically doing a laxative," she says.

There's no research to support that people need to regularly take laxatives or "cleanse their colons" to improve their health, Dr. Sam says. In fact, it could be dangerous: "The issue when you're doing colon cleanses and taking excessive laxatives is that you're actually pulling out so much water from your colon that you become dehydrated," she says. Severe dehydration could lead to electrolyte abnormalities, heat injury, and even death, she says. "It's important for people to be careful and get advice from their doctor," she says.

Like other detoxes, the whole premise that you need to "cleanse" your colon is kind of screwed up to begin with. More and more research supports that bacteria in the body, specifically in the gastrointestinal tract, actually has some benefits, Dr. Sam says. Gut bacteria helps digest food, fight infections, and protect against disease — so you want some of it to stay inside your body. Taking laxatives or doing saltwater cleanses could be risky, because they mess with this important "good" bacteria. "Changing the natural state of the body by taking these 'natural' things is actually affecting the equilibrium or natural way the body cleans itself," she says.

Of course, many people are into saltwater cleanses because they believe it's a way to lose weight. Sure, if you are passing lots of bowel movements and getting liquid out of your body, you may feel somewhat slimmer, Dr. Sam says. But drinking salt water is not a healthy habit that doctors would ever tell you to adopt for weight loss, because it's dangerous and certainly not sustainable.

The bottom line to remember is that drinking salt water is generally bad for you. Unless you're about to get a colonoscopy, and have been prescribed a colonoscopy prep plan that involves drinking a sodium and chloride solution, you shouldn't be drinking salt water. If you're having gastrointestinal issues and feel like you need to jumpstart a bowel movement, then you should ask your doctor before you try any DIY remedy. As with most health knowledge on the internet, sometimes you have to take it with a grain of salt.