

Spring Cleaning :

Herbal and Natural Detoxification

By Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD

It's finally spring! Mother Earth is cleansing and renewing herself. Life awakens from the slumber of winter. New greens sprout and flower abundantly as the old husks of last year's growth blow down and return to the earth. The rivers run high, cleansing their banks and washing debris down to the sea. All over the world people celebrate life's renewal with the rituals of Beltane, Easter, Passover and May Day.

In our own lives, as we move in harmony with the earth's natural cycles, this is the ideal time to renew ourselves too. It's time for personal spring cleaning, time to cleanse ourselves of accumulated toxins and habits that reduce our vitality and health.

All living beings generate toxic materials as the result of normal metabolism. All have evolved the ability to cleanse themselves by detoxifying their waste products. Our bodies are blessed with multiple means to eliminate and neutralize toxins, including the liver, digestive system, the kidneys, lymphatics, skin and lungs.

Besides our internal production of metabolic toxins, we also expose ourselves to a variety of modern industrial and environmental pollutants. In many cases, our natural cleansing processes are unable to effectively detoxify these new, unfamiliar compounds. The burden of carcinogens, mutagens, radiation, hormones, antibiotics and pesticides in our environment and food is far greater than it has ever been.

If these pollutants build up and overwhelm the body's ability to neutralize and eliminate them, internal pollution or 'toxicity' results. If unchecked, this imbalance causes increased levels of free radicals, inflammation and oxidative damage to cells and tissues. If the body's detoxification enzyme systems are affected, a vicious cycle of reduced vitality, energy and organ function results.

Chronic toxicity contributes to serious illnesses, such as heart disease, cancer and auto-immune inflammations. Toxicity also may express itself as variety of disabling symptoms, such as fatigue, headaches, aches and pains, behavioral disturbances, chronic infections, allergies, infertility and food intolerances. Many people look for external causes such as chronic Epstein-Barr Virus and candidiasis when these symptoms occur, but it's important to first look at the health of one's inner ecology and make improvements if necessary.

A healthy liver is the cornerstone of vitality. The liver continuously filters the blood, neutralizing and preparing toxins for elimination in bile. These toxins are then secreted by the gall bladder into

the intestines for final elimination.

Because your liver bears the brunt of exposure to external toxins, take good care of it by avoiding pesticides, herbicides, and other environmental pollutants. Minimize use of alcohol, acetaminophen and other liver-stressing recreational and therapeutic drugs. Try to eat a variety of nutritious organic foods. Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*) helps protect the liver itself from damage caused by toxic injuries.

Alteratives (also called blood purifiers) are tonic herbs that help the liver purify the blood. These include Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*), Burdock (*Arctium lappa*), Nettles (*Urtica dioica*), Oregon Grape (*Berberis aquifolium*) and apple cider vinegar.

It's equally important to maintain a well-balanced gut ecology, as the helpful bacteria that live in one's digestive tract neutralize a wide range of toxic substances for us. Excessive use of antibiotics, antacids and junk foods can disrupt this important aspect of digestion. Acidophilus supplements, yogurt with live cultures and a healthy, whole food diet can help correct imbalances in the gut's ecology.

Be sure to drink enough pure water and other clear liquids, eat plenty of fiber and exercise regularly to maintain regular bowel elimination. Constipation allows internal putrefaction of bowel wastes, increasing levels of toxins in the stool. These are then absorbed through the intestine's walls back into the bloodstream. Herbal laxatives for occasional use include Plantain seed (*Plantago major*), Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), Senna (*Cassia senna*), and Cascara (*Cascara sagarda*).

Bitter herbs are used to stimulate deficient or sluggish digestion. These include Hops (*Humulus lupulus*), Horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*) and Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*). Cholagogue herbs such as Wild Yam (*Dioscorea villosa*), Oregon Grape and Olive oil stimulate bile flow, aiding elimination through this route.

The kidneys filter the blood, secreting water-soluble toxins as urine. The kidneys are usually best supported by increasing water and clear liquid intake. Occasionally, gentle diuretics such as Cleavers (*Gallium aparine*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) or Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) will be helpful.

The lymphatic vessels collect excess fluid from the body's tissues, filter it in hundreds of lymph glands, and then return the purified fluid back to the circulation. This system is especially active when infection is present. Signs of lymphatic congestion include edema and swollen lymph glands in the neck, armpits or groin. If needed, lymphatic flow can be stimulated with gentle massage and herbs such as Echinacea (*Echinacea sp.*), Cleavers and Red clover.

The skin is also one of the body's elimination organs. Skin eruptions are often a sign of liver weakness or general toxicity. Diaphoretic herbs increase the skin's excretion of waste by stimulating perspiration. These include Cayenne, Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), Elder flowers (*Sambucus nigra*) and Yarrow. Diaphoretics can be beneficially combined with sauna or sweat

lodge rituals.

The lungs are yet another route to eliminate toxins. Remember to breathe deeply, opening the lungs fully. This brings in cleansing oxygen and eliminates carbon dioxide and other waste products of metabolism from the body. Deep breathing also releases endorphins, promoting a feeling of well-being and mental clarity.

Perhaps the most important organ of elimination in humans is the mind. Effective spiritual practices enable us to see and think clearly in a world often filled with stressful stimuli. Ultimately, detoxifying is a mental process. It is our own mental clarity that enables us to focus our will on making healthy choices.

Once you've identified which of your cleansing systems could be supported or stimulated, create an individualized detoxification formula that is ideal for you. If your health condition is complex or difficult to assess, you may wish to consult a knowledgeable herbalist for guidance.

For example, if you determine that your liver and digestion are sluggish, but that other cleansing organs are in good shape, you might create a formula with Dandelion, Red Clover, Nettles and Oregon Grape. Or, if the lymphatics seem congested, your formula could include Cleavers, Echinacea and Red Clover. For someone in excellent balance, pure water or simple mint tea could be sufficient. Most people find it best to take detoxification herbs as a tea, typically one cup 3 or 4 times a day.

For optimal cleansing, combine your detoxification formula with an elimination diet and cleansing fast. The elimination diet and cleansing fast is another tool that helps you eliminate harmful materials from your body by stimulating your body's natural detoxification processes. The method described below is adapted from work pioneered by the well known California physician Elson Haas, MD. Heroic detoxification programs, involving enemas, colonics, laxatives, purgatives and chelation can also be effective, but as an herbalist I prefer to use more natural, gentler methods whenever possible.

The combination of herbal cleansing tonics and the elimination diet and cleansing fast can help remove blockages that impede your natural flow of healing energy. It can increase vitality, creativity, calmness and spiritual attunement to what is happening in your body and the world around you. It can correct the root causes of illness by helping you change from your current diet and lifestyle to one that is more optimal, with life long health benefits.

This process has three phases: The elimination diet, the cleansing fast and transition to an improved diet. Throughout all phases be sure to drink 6 to 8 glasses of pure water and/or your detoxification tea a day. Often fresh carrot juice or mild laxatives, such as prunes or psyllium are helpful. If you can, take a vigorous walk daily.

During this process, as toxins are released, chronic or subtle symptoms may surface and become more acute and noticeable. If you are chronically ill, weak or emotionally vulnerable, the "healing crisis" of released toxins can be devastating. If these symptoms persist, or are severe

or worrisome, consult your health care provider for advice.

During the elimination diet phase you eliminate groups of foods from your diet, starting with those that are most complex to digest and have the highest toxic potential. Discuss with your health care provider whether to continue prescription drugs, medicinal herbs and nutritional supplements. *Heavy caffeine users:* Reduce your caffeine intake by one fifth daily for five days, and then stop all caffeine. *Daily alcohol users:* Consult your health care provider about how to proceed.

On day 1: Eliminate all chemically altered foods, especially hydrogenated oils and nitrite-preserved meats. Eliminate drug-containing foods such as coffee, chocolate, black tea and alcohol, and any recreational drugs.

Day 2: Eliminate all fried foods, red meat, butter, lard, and foods containing artificial dyes, flavorings or preservatives. Switch to all organic foods for the duration of the cleansing process.

Day 3: Eliminate all meat, cheese, and highly processed foods, such as those containing refined sugar and flour. Start and gradually increase your detoxification tea and cleansing formula from 8 ounces each today to 32 ounces a day during the cleansing fast.

A typical cleansing fast formula may consist of the juice of 4 fresh organic lemons in 32 ounces of pure water, sweetened with maple or barley syrup. You can add cayenne or ginger to taste if their stimulant qualities are needed.

Day 4: Eliminate dairy products, seafood and fish.

Day 5: Eliminate nuts, vegetable oils, beans and legumes.

Day 6: Eliminate seeds and honey.

Day 7: Eliminate all grains and starchy vegetables.

Day 8: Eliminate fruiting and root vegetables, and all solid fruits except melons.

At this point your diet should consist of water, your detoxification tea and cleansing formula, fruit and vegetable juices, melons and leafy vegetables.

Day 9: Eliminate all remaining solid foods. This is the start of the cleansing fast.

The cleansing fast phase lasts from one to three days, depending on your physical condition and need for cleansing. During this fast, expect a physical feeling of lightness. It's a time to rest, reflect and let go of emotional as well as physical burdens and addictions. You may experience changes in energy level and consciousness, so schedule it when you have little outward responsibility. If you feel weak, try drinking some fresh carrot juice. Expect the "healing crisis". If severe, you may need to interrupt the process and try again later.

The final phase is a transition to your ideal diet. Gradually add food groups back into your diet,

start with those you eliminated last (on day 9). As you work back up the list at your own pace, you may discover that you no longer desire some of the more potentially toxic food groups you eliminated in the earlier days.

Be mindful of changes in the way you feel as you add each new food group. Keep a food and symptom diary. Avoid any foods that make you feel bad during this sensitive time. Discovering and eating the combination of foods that make up your optimal diet will help you enjoy the best possible health.

In addition to the universal principles of good nutrition, your individuality and unique experiences determine your personal ideal diet. Trust your intuition: when you are clear-headed and paying attention your body knows what you need.

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. For advice regarding specific health conditions consult a qualified health care professional.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

Howard W. Morningstar MD, board-certified family physician, is a graduate of Yale University School of Medicine and the California School of Herbal Studies. He and his wife Sue Morningstar CNM, women's health nurse practitioner, share a family medicine practice in Ashland, Oregon. They can be reached at (541) 482-2032.