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Cleansed or Conned?

A look inside the juice-cleanse trend.

By Hilary Achauer

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Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Teresa Godfrey (not her real name) wanted a break.

She'd spent the last few months eating too much and drinking more than usual, and she was feeling the effects of that excess. And she really wanted to lose 5 lb.

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To jumpstart her healthy habits and drop some pounds, Godfrey decided to do something drastic. Each day for three days, she would drink six brightly colored, attractively designed bottles of juice filled with things such as spinach, kale, agave nectar, cashew milk, cayenne extract and lemon. Each bottle, delivered to her apartment by BluePrint Cleanse, cost about US\$11, for a total of \$65 a day.

Before she started, Godfrey shared her plan with some of her co-workers in her Manhattan office. A few of them wanted in.

“One girl was getting married, one was a fad dieter who would try any crazy diet, one dude was a total frat boy—I have no idea why he wanted in—and one girl just wanted to be part of any cool-kids plan,” Godfrey said.

Unprepared for the experience of consuming only strange-tasting liquids for three days, many found the experiment was over before it really started. One of the women in Godfrey’s group discovered she hated how the juice tasted.

“People were tapping out after the second beverage,” Godfrey said. “We have this super-strange IT guy who wound up taking all the extra juice home every night.

“Nothing brings you closer to colleagues you barely know than the concern you’re either not going to be able to crap or that you’re going to crap your pants at the office,” Godfrey said.

The popularity of juice cleanses has taken off in recent years. BluePrint Cleanse juices can be found in Whole Foods, and many people are buying juicers and whipping up their own concoctions at home.

Proponents say cleanses rid your body of toxins, clear your mind, rest your gut, and, of course, help shed pounds. Doctors and nutritionists point out that no studies support these claims and say the body has its own effective method for removing toxins.

We all like to be clean. But can we scrub our body of toxins the same way we’d clean out our car?

History of the Modern Cleanse

The original juice cleanse is the Master Cleanse, developed by Stanley Burroughs in the 1940s. Also known as the Lemonade Diet, the Master Cleanse lasts for 10 days and includes only one drink, a mix of lemon juice, cayenne pepper and maple syrup. Oh, and a cup of herbal laxative tea every night, along with four cups of salt water in the morning. Beyoncé famously lost more than 20 lb. while following the Master Cleanse when preparing for her role in “Dreamgirls.”

Juice cleanses remained an extreme option reserved mostly for celebrities until BluePrint Cleanse began offering its six-juice-a-day cleanses in 2007. These pre-packaged juices took the work out of juicing, and BluePrint offers different levels of cleanses and juices made with ingredients such as cashew milk and agave nectar. Soon, the juice-cleanse craze began, and by 2013, juicing became a **\$5 billion business**, spawning companies such as Cooler Cleanse, Life Juice Cleanse, Juice Press, Organic Avenue and Ritual Wellness.

Those who swear by juice cleanses say it’s not just about weight loss. Advocates say drinking juice for three to five days will flush toxins from your body while letting your gut rest, freeing your body to heal.

According to the BluePrint Cleanse website, its cleanses “take away the work of digesting food, (allowing) the system to rid itself of old toxins while facilitating healing.” The site says the cleanses will help the body rid itself of built-up matter, cleanse the blood, rebuild and heal the immune system, and fight off degenerative diseases.

That’s a lot to expect of juice.



Juices have become more popular in recent years as people look for ways to optimize health and fitness.

Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Athletes and “the Other Juicing”

A lifelong athlete, Crystal Cañez has been doing CrossFit since 2010. The program got her attention because it was so hard.

“I got beyond obsessed (with CrossFit),” Cañez said. “Why was I not good at this the first time I tried it? CrossFit was a whole different beast.”

After a year of CrossFit, Cañez attended a Level 1 Seminar and became a coach at CrossFit Hillcrest in San Diego, California. She was slowly improving at CrossFit, but one piece of the puzzle was missing: her nutrition.

In 2011 Cañez met Drew Canole, who created the fitness-and-health website Fitlife.tv. Cañez began working as an intern and learning about Canole’s business and philosophy.

Canole is an advocate of juice cleansing. On his [website](#), Canole says drinking freshly juiced vegetables and fruits “will finally detoxify your body of the mass pollutants that have been stuck inside you your whole life.”

“I did a five-day detox called the Alpha Reset,” Cañez said. “From that experience, not only physically but mentally, I was completely transformed.”

She added: “The (cleanse) was able to give me a resting period to reset everything from past damage—from eating gluten to dairy, just a lot of outside pollutants—literally cleaning my body from the inside out.”

In addition to the physical benefits, Cañez found the cleanse to be a mental detox as well.

“It takes a certain type of person to do (a cleanse) correctly.”

—Crystal Cañez

“My environment was different, the people I hung out with were different The whole lifestyle was different,” she said. “If you’re fasting for five days, it’s not like you’re going to be able to hang out in these crazy social environments. It’s kind of more alone time.”

Cañez said the fast made her slow down mentally. She read more. Instead of rushing from place to place, she sat quietly.



Israel Woolfolk

Athlete and coach Crystal Cañez swears by the juice cleanse if it's done correctly.

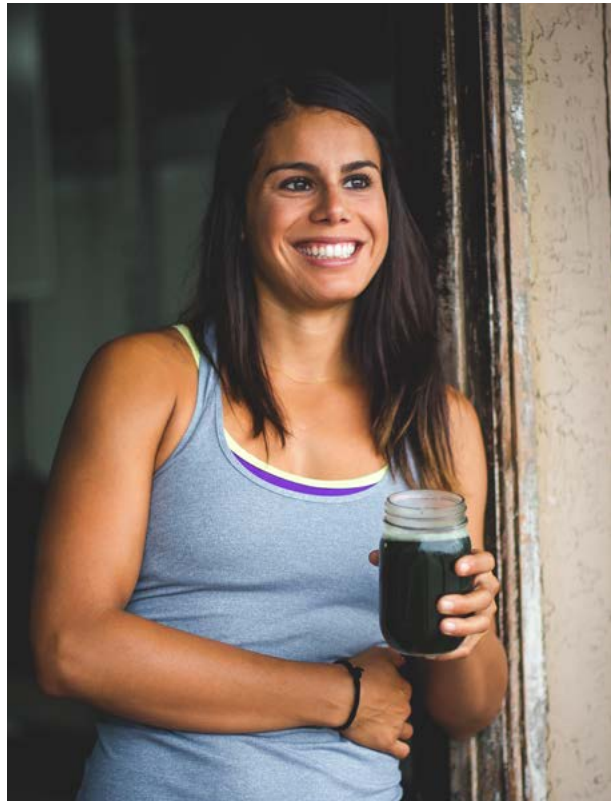
Now, three years after that first fast, Cañez said she does a five-day juice fast about two or three times a year, particularly after the holiday season or if her diet hasn't been particularly healthy.

"I use the five-day detox as more of a reset," she said. "Whenever we get a facial, we like to scrub out all of the stuff out of our face, so it's kind of the same thing for my body."

Cañez said she thinks juice fasting is something everyone should try at least once in his or her life, if only for the mental discipline.

"If they are doing it for the quick fixes, this is not something they want to dabble in. It can also be very addictive for those looking for that quick fix. A lot of people come into CrossFit because we see these beautiful bodies. There is that vanity coming into it. It takes a certain type of person to do (a cleanse) correctly," she said.

Cañez said people should try a juice cleanse in order to flush out toxins, reset their gut and improve their athletic performance once they start eating.



Israel Woolfolk

Cañez believes everyone should try a juice cleanse at least once in his or her lifetime.

"I don't work with people who are doing it just to lose 10 lb. quickly," she said.

Cañez makes her own juice and cautions against the store-bought juice cleanses. She said some of the popular juice cleanses contain as much as 120 g of sugar in each bottle.

"Within three or four sips your insulin is so spiked up, and a lot of people don't take that into consideration," she said.

Cañez recommends more greens and less sugar. She said lemons clean out the blood, and greens help reset the gut. As far as frequency, Cañez says a juice cleanse about two to three times a year is ideal.

"The digestive system is like a machine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with cleaning out your gut."

The Group Cleanse

When Godfrey and her co-workers did their group cleanse in 2011, the primary motivation for most of them was to drop pounds.

"The only reason (for me) to do it was to lose weight," she said. Removing toxins was a side benefit, but that alone was not enough to get Godfrey to spend about \$200 for three days of juice.

On the first day of her cleanse, Godfrey went to a spin class at the gym. She felt fine and had no problem putting down the six bottles of pre-made juice each day.

One woman, known for her love of any type of diet, gave up after the second juice of Day 1.

"It's disgusting. I'm done," Godfrey remembers her saying.

"It wasn't overly spinach-y. It wasn't bad," Godfrey said of the green juice.

One of the women in the group didn't like celery, a major ingredient in two of the six juices. She hung in there, just skipping the juices she didn't like.

By noon of the second day, the co-worker Godfrey affectionately called "the frat boy" said he was dying.

"He was lightheaded. He couldn't get any work done and spent all of his time complaining about being hungry," Godfrey said.

One of the participants, a woman who ate mostly junk food, had trouble finishing her juice and left most of them in the office fridge.

"By Day 2, I was feeling pretty tired, lightheaded," Godfrey



While many start a juice cleanse to lose weight, some have also experienced a mental or psychological change.

said. She added: "I was almost like not in my body, floating. It wasn't good or bad."

However, Godfrey did discover an unpleasant side effect of not eating.

"I became obsessed with having diarrhea or not pooping," she said. The first cleanse she did left her constipated, so on her second she took a herbal laxative.

"By Day 3 I was exhausted. I just wanted to chew. I would go to bed at 7 p.m. just to get to the next day."

"By Day 3 I was exhausted. I just wanted to chew."

—Teresa Godfrey

A few stalwarts hung in for the entire three days, including Godfrey. When they were done, they had a massive pig-out to celebrate the end of the cleanse.

Godfrey lost 5 lb., but the weight came back fairly soon after she started eating normally.

Although Godfrey said she initially did the juice cleanse to lose weight and atone for weeks of overindulging, she was surprised to find some psychological benefits from not eating for three days.

"I go through the day eating so much," Godfrey said. "I rarely experience hunger. It's more like, 'Oh, it's time to eat.'"

She said it was interesting to experience what real hunger feels like.

"It's 100 percent an exercise in self-control," she said.

The cleanse didn't bring about glowing skin or a dramatic improvement in her health.

"It's more like a jumpstart or a reset. It's good when I've been off the wagon (as far as healthy eating) for a long time," she said. "It puts me on the right foot to start over."

Cleanse Gone Wrong

Not everyone has a positive experience with juice cleansing. Keka Schermerhorn is a 36-year-old Manhattan resident who works for a hedge fund. She did her first juice cleanse years ago to cut weight for a kettlebell competition.

Courtesy Keka Schermerhorn



Keka Schermerhorn, an athlete and kids coach, has had negative experiences with juice cleanses.

"Not only did I gain weight but I had serious hypoglycemia, low blood pressure and digestive-related side effects (from the cleanse)," she said. Schermerhorn had to resort to traditional methods—such as sitting in the sauna and running in layers of clothing—to drop weight for her competition.

A lifelong athlete who's done everything from ballet to boxing, Schermerhorn has been doing CrossFit for five years. She runs a CrossFit Kids program at Reebok CrossFit Fifth Avenue.

"I've done so many juice cleanses," she said. "For a period I would do a juice cleanse for 24 hours every Friday—that went on for a couple of years."

Even though she always reacted badly to cleanses, Schermerhorn kept doing them. Within eight hours of starting the cleanse she would get cold, her skin would turn grey, she'd break out in cold sweats, her heart would race, she'd feel sick to her stomach, and she'd get a headache.

People told her these symptoms were caused by toxins leaving her body. Her friends insisted her body would get used to it, so she kept trying cleanses.

"I'm somebody who doesn't give up," she said. She remembers thinking her body must need these cleanses if it was reacting that badly.

Her hypoglycemia got so bad that Schermerhorn's boyfriend took to carrying candy around in his pocket when she started to turn grey and shiver.

"The insulin spikes were the worst. I didn't know it, but I was just feeding my hypoglycemia," she said.

As soon as Schermerhorn stopped juicing and started eating in a way that regulated her insulin, she noticed an immediate improvement. It's been three years since Schermerhorn last did a juice fast, and she hasn't experienced a hypoglycemic episode since.

When Schermerhorn encounters people who are contemplating a juice cleanse, she tells them they're crazy.

"Usually my first question is 'why?'" she said. "The most common answer is 'I'm going to the beach next week or I have a wedding next week.' They want to reach that immediate goal. I say there are other ways you can get there," Schermerhorn said.

As far as the mental benefits of juice cleanses, Schermerhorn said she derives so much psychological pleasure from eating that she can't imagine why she would want to give that up, even for a short amount of time.

"There's a tremendous social aspect to (eating)," she said. A former chef, Schermerhorn looks at food as more than fuel. It provides her with a deep sense of contentment. However, it wasn't always this way for her.

"It's taken me a while to develop a comfort level with food, where it's not the enemy," she said.

The self-denial involved in a juice cleanse does have a punitive aspect.

"If you're feeding your body the things that it needs, not the things that you think you want, I think there's tremendous comfort in that. A bowl of Brussels sprouts with pastured bacon is the most delicious thing I can have," she said.

Daily Detox

Like an organized closet or a clean desk, there's something satisfying about the idea of cleaning up and starting over. It's appealing to think we can do the same thing with our bodies, especially after a period of overindulging. Unfortunately, no scientific evidence supports the idea that a juice cleanse—or any sort of fast—removes toxins from the body.

"I'm not a proponent of detoxification programs," alternative guru Dr. Andrew Weil wrote on his website, DrWeil.com. "The body does a pretty good job of cleansing and purifying itself."

Weil is a leading expert on holistic health and integrative medicine.

Sources such as [Harvard Medical School](#), [BBC News](#) and the [Mayo Clinic](#) are unanimous: There's no data or science to support the claims made for detox diets.

"To date, there has been little research on the various detoxification diets, and as a result, there is no scientific support for or against any of their health claims," Maria Adams wrote in a [2012 post](#) for Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, a Harvard Medical School teaching hospital.

An [article](#) on the website Science-Based Medicine stated, "There's no published evidence to suggest that detox treatments, kits or rituals have any effect on our body's ability to eliminate waste products effectively."

The liver and kidneys are not filters, capturing and retaining toxins. When toxins enter the bloodstream, the liver and

kidneys process the harmful substances and eliminate them in sweat, urine and feces. The colon contains bacteria that detoxify food wastes, and mucus membranes prevent those toxins from re-entering the body.

"We have our digestive tract, our kidneys and our liver that all perform those (detoxifying) functions for us, naturally, and when we eat a balanced diet, those organs are better able to perform those functions," said Margaux Neveu, a registered dietitian and nutrition expert who blogs at [Food as RX](#).

Neveu said a juice cleanse can actually inhibit the body's ability to filter toxins. Juicing fruits and vegetables removes the fiber, which Neveu says helps the body naturally eliminate toxins.

"You're not giving your body the fiber that it needs to actually soak up those toxins you get from eating fruits and vegetables," Neveu said. She noted that some toxins are there naturally, while others are related to pesticides.

Like many health-care professionals, Neveu is bothered by the absence of clinical research supporting the claims made by companies selling juice cleanses.

"Three to five days of eating fruits and vegetables is not going to make up for a year of unhealthy habits."

—Margaux Neveu

"They are not regulated by anyone, so they can make these claims and these statements that are just not true. You go through and you look at the clinical research, there's just nothing to support any of the claims that they make," Neveu said.

The other problem with a juice cleanse, Neveu said, is its short-term nature.

"(A cleanse) doesn't teach you how to have a healthy relationship with food. You just kind of go on a three-day thing, and you're not learning anything from it because it's not sustainable long term," she said.

For those people looking for a quick way to lose weight, Neveu said severely restricting calories could work against you by slowing down your metabolism.

"In cutting down calories and protein, you actually cause your body to convert to breaking down your muscles for energy, so you're not really losing weight, and your body is breaking down your good, lean tissues to preserve itself," she said.

Neveu said the idea of a cleanse "resting the gut" is similarly misguided and not supported by any clinical research.

"Gut rest is not beneficial for someone who has a healthy, functioning GI tract," she said. "It actually is the complete opposite."

Our bodies are designed to work best when we consume nutrient-dense, fiber-filled food. Fiber slows down digestion so the foods can be absorbed. Fiber also bulks up the stool to help carry the toxins out.

Any CrossFit athlete knows if you don't challenge your muscles, they atrophy.

"The same thing happens to your gut," Neveu said. "It's a muscle."

Neveu said people who have eating disorders or who are in the ICU for a long time can experience gut atrophy, impairing the gut's function and sometimes causing irreversible damage.



Courtesy of Margaux Neveu

Margaux Neveu speaks out against juice cleanses and encourages healthy eating rather than fasting.

"Outside of religious or meditative reasons, I don't see that juice cleanses have a place. They are not effective for weight loss or removing toxins," Neveu said.

Neveu also said certain people should never attempt a juice cleanse: diabetics, women who are pregnant, growing children or anyone who has had an eating disorder.

"Three to five days of eating fruits and vegetables is not going to make up for a year of unhealthy habits," Neveu said.

No Quick Fix

Fasting and food restrictions are a part of almost every major religion. Limiting or completely abstaining from food may address some primal need or might help give a sense of control in a chaotic world.

We live in a time when food—especially cheap, unhealthy food—is everywhere, and for many people, a juice cleanse is an enforced break from the constant onslaught of food—of thinking about it, shopping for it, preparing it and eating it.

Experts are clear: Current data does not support claims that juice cleanses rid the body of toxins, and your gut doesn't need to rest.

If you're going to do a juice fast, be realistic about the results. Avoid fads and quick-fix solutions and consider the best approach to achieve your long-term goals. Always consult with a professional, and if you do choose to follow a cleanse program, pay attention to how your body responds. If something works, consider adding it to your regimen. If you don't see results, move on.

Just like building strength takes weeks, months, even years, true health is achieved over time.



About the Author

Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary writes for the CrossFit Journal and contributes to the CrossFit Games site. An amateur boxer-turned-CrossFit-athlete, Hilary lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and trains at CrossFit Pacific Beach. To contact her, visit hilary-achauer.com.