Fiber, not fast-fix cleansing products, is key to colorectal health: a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
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If something seems too good to be true, it probably is--especially when it comes to fast-fix weight loss solutions. Some over-the-counter consumer products may even do more harm than good, according to experts at the University of Cincinnati.

A recent example is the concept of colon cleansing for weight loss. Companies are touting the benefits of colon cleansing products, claiming they can help people lose weight, release toxins, rejuvenate the body, relieve constipation and more.

Dr. Janice Rafferty, professor and chief of colorectal surgery at UC, says these products are not scientifically proven to have the advertised benefits.

According to Rafferty, good colorectal health boils down to a few simple concepts: healthful food intake and proper hydration.

"What people need for general colorectal health is a diet high in insoluble fiber and low in fat. It will help maintain regular bowel function and help prevent benign anorectal problems, like hemorrhoids and fissures," she explains.

"People should not instantly equate the term 'natural' with 'healthy'. Many of these
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Janice Frederick Rafferty, an associate professor and chief of the Division of Colorectal Surgery at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine

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over-the-counter colon cleansing products contain a natural laxative like Senna," says Rafferty.

"These natural laxatives are stimulants that cause the smooth muscle in the colon to contract, and over time these products can cause the colon to stop contracting on its own and lead to serious problems that require surgical intervention."

She recommends that all adults aged 18 or older consume at least 25 to 30 grams of fiber every day from whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

Fiber has the added benefit of making you feel fuller, especially if taken before a meal, which can be beneficial for people trying to lose weight.

"The vast majority of people eating a typical western diet don't get enough insoluble fiber or fluid. If you maintain a healthy food intake, the colon won't need any help to do its job of removing waste and toxins from the body," Rafferty explains.

"A normally functioning colon should also have bacteria in it, so removing bacteria with these 'get skinny quick' schemes is not necessary and can actually be harmful."

Rafferty adds that straining or sitting on the toilet for long periods of time in an effort to have a bowel movement is a bad idea as it can cause damage to the pelvic floor, leading to elimination problems later. She says the first thing people who suffer from constipation should do is look at their diet and make modifications.

Persistent problems should be discussed with a gastroenterologist or colorectal surgeon.

"What goes in must come out," Rafferty says. "Many patients who complain of constipation and hard stool are consuming mostly processed food and virtually no fiber or water, so the source of the problem is obvious."

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